

婚約者は突然に

メグとゼロンVII

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SUGISAWA

イラスト 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

 電撃文庫

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

メグとゼロンVII

婚約者は突然に





C O N T E N T S

序 章	「大変なこと」	9
第一章	「三三〇六年始まる」	13
第二章	「質問」	41
第三章	「大嵐」	69
第四章	「目撃者」	117
第五章	「依頼」	155
第六章	「写真」	185
第七章	「ケネス」	217
第八章	「ブリジット」	259
第九章	「あのときの思い」	295
第十章	「婚約者は突然に」	321
最終章	「終わりと始まりと」	345

メグとセロン

婚約者は突然に

Prologue: Something Big	6
Chapter 1: The Start of the Year 3306	7
Chapter 2: The Question	17
Chapter 3: The Storm	27
Chapter 4: The Witness	44
Chapter 5: The Request	60
Chapter 6: The Photograph	71
Chapter 7: Kenneth	84
Chapter 8: Bridget	98
Chapter 9: Even now, I feel the same	110
Chapter 10: The Fiancée out of the Blue	119
Finale: Endings and Beginnings	127

Prologue: Something Big

<It's been a while, SC Jenny.>

<It sure has, newbie. Or I guess I can't call you that any more. Want me to call you by name?>

<It's all right.>

<You're calling from Raputoa, right? Should I call you back?>

<Yes, please. Oh, but I wanted to ask you something quickly.>

<Mhm.>

<Did my letter reach SC Megmica? What happened afterwards?>

<Things are turning out as I expected, more or less.>

<What happened?>

<Something big.>

<...>

<Gimme your number. I'll call back and fill you in on the details.>

<Hello? Newbie, are you busy today? It's gonna be a really long story. Don't worry about the phone bill, though. I've got it covered.>

<No, I have time. Thank you.>

<Where are you?>

<The school parlor. The teachers gave me permission to use the phone here so I could 'talk to someone from the Capital District I'm deeply indebted to'. There's no one around.>

<Good. I'm glad you're quick on the uptake. By any chance, did you come to school on a weekend just to ask me this stuff? I feel kind of bad now.>

<Don't worry, SC Jenny! I'm just curious to see what happened with SC Seron and SC Megmica. What did you mean by 'something big'? Please tell me everything!>

<Sure thing. You have the right and duty to hear it all.>

Chapter 1: The Start of the Year 3306

The 14th day of the first month, the year 3306 of the World Calendar.

There was a blue planet with a very large moon.

90 percent of the planet was covered in water, and the poles were covered in ice.

There was an oval, potato-shaped continent in the northern hemisphere of that planet.

The southern part of the continent was a brown desert. But as the latitude increased, the land exploded in a splash of green.

There was a massive mountain range in the middle of the continent, beginning at the desert. The mountains, capped with snow even in the middle of summer, ended abruptly about halfway up the continent. The two rivers on either side of the mountain range converged there, creating the massive Lutoni River that flowed straight north and into the sea.

There were two nations on the continent, one on either side.

In the east was the Roxcheanuk Confederation, also known as Roxche. It was made up of 16 member states and territories.

In the west were the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, also known as Sou Be-Il. It was made up of the kingdoms of Bezel and Iltoa, along with a handful of small subordinate countries.

For eons, the people of the East and West had warred against one another with the Lutoni River between them.

In more contemporary times, each side of the continent forged alliances, and Roxche and Sou Be-Il were formed almost simultaneously. What followed was a cold war, one massive war, and many smaller conflicts.

But about 20 years ago, the cold war was ended by a certain incident.

The threat of another Great War was beginning to fade.

The capital of Roxche was the Special Capital District, a region independent of any country within the confederation.

It was on the northeastern end of Roxche, very far from the East-West border but also a fair distance from the sea.

The Special Capital District was a circular area about 30 kilometers in diameter. It had been built when Roxche was first formed.

The city center was home to the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, civic centers, and courthouses. Outside the center was a business district crowded with department stores and hotels. Further outside was a residential district full of apartment buildings.

It was daytime, cloudy and cold with a high chance of snow.

Strauski Megmica was in a room on the fifth floor of one of the apartment buildings.

Because she was from Sou Be-Il, 'Strauski' was her family name and 'Megmica' her given name. Her nickname was 'Meg'.

Meg was turning 17 next month. Her long black hair was tied into pigtails. She had fair skin and large dark eyes.

She wore the winter uniform of the 4th Capital Secondary School—a green jacket, a white dress shirt, a red ribbon, and a green checkered skirt.

“Say,” she began in Bezelese, sitting at the dining table across from another girl, “about that boy who came here before—Treize—he’s from Iks, right? did you meet him there?”

The girl across from Meg was also in the same uniform. Her name was Lillianne Schultz, also known as Lillia.

Lillia’s full name included the family names of her parents and grandparents and was very long, but she almost never used it. Because she was Roxchean, ‘Schultz’ was her family name.

Lillia had long brown hair and light brown eyes, and in contrast to Meg, looked very self-assured.

“Huh? Y-yeah. I did,” Lillia replied, taken aback.

“Lillia. Did you talk about anything important with him?” Meg asked, looking into Lillia’s eyes. Her eyes glinted with hunger for information.

Lillia raised an eyebrow. “No. I didn’t. Things were so hectic that I barely got to say hello,” she replied nonchalantly.

“Is that all?” Meg sounded unimpressed.

“That’s all.”

“Did you make plans to meet next time?”

“Actually, no. We just didn’t have time to plan that stuff,” Lillia said with a sip of tea, not sounding bothered in the least.

“That’s so sad,” Meg mumbled.

“Huh? For who?” Lillia asked.

“Both of you.”

“Really?”

“You almost never get to see him, right?” Meg said with a serious look.

“I guess, but…” Lillia began, but stopped. She met Meg’s gaze. “Meg, did something happen?”

Meg’s eyes widened for an instant, but determination quickly rose to them.

“Yeah. I wanted your advice on something.”

“Oh? On what? What happened?” Lillia urged, pouring herself more tea. She then put the teapot on the hot plate on the dresser by the table to warm up the rest.

Meg took out a crumpled envelope from the leather bag at her feet.

“It’s about this letter.”

“Oh, gimme a sec,” Lillia said, quickly clearing the newspaper off the table. Meg put the envelope on the tabletop.

The envelope was an extraordinarily normal one, sold at the campus store in the 4th Capital Secondary School. It was addressed to Strauski Megmica and postmarked about a month ago.

“Is this a love letter, Meg?”

“Kind of, but not really.”

“Can I read it?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Of course! I, Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz, solemnly swear to speak to no one of what I am about to see!” Lillia vowed, and picked up the letter. Upside-down, she spotted the name of the sender with no return address.

“Huh? I’ve seen this name before...” she trailed off.

“That’s—” Meg began, but Lillia cut her off.

“I remember! This is the Raputoan exchange student who studied here in the autumn. I remember seeing the name on the newspaper.”

“That’s right. This is the club’s newbie. You have such a good memory, Lillia,” Meg exclaimed.

“Ha ha. It’s nothing that impressive. Someone told me at the beginning of the year that I wasn’t just a stupid girl after all, you know! ...Anyway, can I read it?”

Meg nodded firmly. “Please. Tell me what you think about it.”

“Right.”

Lillia gingerly pulled the letter out of the open envelope.

Inside was a piece of stationery paper from the campus store. About half the page was filled with handwritten Roxchean.

“Let’s see...”

Lillia’s eyes scanned the page quickly.

The letter began with greetings and an expression of gratitude before moving on to the issue at hand.

The issue was simply that Seron was in love with Meg and that she should know how he felt.

“This is...well, wow.” Lillia breathed. When she looked up, Meg was watching stone-faced from across the table.

Lillia reread the letter to make sure she understood its contents. Then she placed it on the table.

“Er...well...” Lillia cringed.

“I’ve been mulling over this letter for the past month,” Meg explained, “I didn’t tell anyone in the newspaper club about it.”

“Well, I guess I understand,” Lillia nodded, still cringing.

“I couldn’t confide in anyone from the club.”

“That makes sense...”

“To be honest, I wanted to tell you about it when I came over at the end of last term. But I didn’t, because we wouldn’t see each other again for a while. I had to visit home, too.”

“Right.”

“And I don’t even know if any of this is true. Our newbie isn’t the type to play stupid pranks—so maybe this is just a misunderstanding?”

“Hmm...”

Lillia read over the letter on the table for the third time.

“What do you think I should do, Lillia? Should I ask the newbie to clarify? But I don’t have an address or phone number or anything. Jenny might know, but if she asks me why I want that info I’ll have to lie to her. I don’t think I can lie convincingly.”



“You know, I’ve never seen you this serious, Meg,” Lillia said, “But you can’t just stand around worrying about this letter forever.”

“Yeah. To be honest...I’m so tired of it.”

Meg’s expression darkened. She picked up her teacup with both hands, drained it, and put it back down.

Lillia quickly folded up the letter, put it back in the envelope, and handed it to Meg.

“Seron’s that guy, right? The one from my Roxchean class last term. Not some other guy named Seron?” Lillia asked. Meg nodded slightly.

“So...has he ever come across as having a crush on you? Trying to ask you out, or something like that...”

Meg shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, I started hanging out more with him since we joined the newspaper club in the summer, but not particularly more than with Larry or Nicholas.”

“No more than the other boys, huh.”

“I’ve never really gone somewhere alone with him, and he’s never asked me out. I talk to him about as much as I talk to the rest of the club.”

“Hm...” Lillia folded her arms.

“So I...I...” Meg gasped, on the verge of tears. Lillia tried to calm her down.

“Don’t cry, Meg. You have to get a hold of yourself.”

Meg nodded.

“Let me get this straight,” Lillia said, making a point of sounding cheerful, “You don’t know how to contact the newbie, and you have no way of getting any contact information. Which means there’s only one option left.”

“What is it?”

“You have to ask Seron yourself.”

“...Is that really the only way?”

“Yes! More tea?”

“Yes, please.”

Meg held out her cup and found her eyes drifting to the envelope. She glared resentfully.

“Here,” Lillia said, filling the cup. “Look, it’s the new year; it’ll be better than just moping around. Club activities start after the break, right?”

“On the 19th, yeah. I’ll probably see Seron again then.”

“Then you have to ask him outright! It’ll take a bit of courage, but there’s no other option. You can’t stay depressed like this forever.”

“All right. So there’s no other way,” Meg said, looking more cheerful already. But this time, Lillia’s expression grew more serious.

“Be honest with me, Meg. What do you think of Seron?”

“Huh? Er...I don’t know.”

“You said at the end of last year that you weren’t interested in anyone.”

“Yeah. You really have a good memory, Lillia.”

“Well, yeah. Anyway, you don’t *like* him like him, right?”

Meg’s gaze rose to the Schultz family ceiling, then fell to the Schultz family’s only daughter.

“You know, I still don’t really know what it’s like to be in love with someone. Seron’s a club member and a friend, so I don’t *not* like him. And I don’t think I would mind dating him. But I don’t know how I would go about feeling like I want to date someone.”

“Mhm. Mhm.” Lillia nodded, putting her elbows on the table.

“And! Most importantly!” Meg raised her voice. Lillia flinched slightly.

“Yeah?”

“Seron is really cool!”

Seron Maxwell was the same age as Lillia, and a year younger than Meg, who had taken a year off school. He had shimmery black hair and grey eyes, and was known for being very handsome.

“Er...right. That’s true,” Lillia agreed as she recalled their meeting. “He was really popular with the girls in our class. I heard someone asked him out but he turned her down.”

“Right? He’s handsome, smart, and a real gentleman too—”

“You have a really high opinion of him, Meg,” Lillia said, grinning. Meg was taken aback.

“O-of course! He works so hard in the newspaper club too!”

Then her voice fell.

“But...”

“But?”

“How am I supposed to believe it when someone says that a cool guy like Seron is in love with me?” Meg said.

“What? Er, well...” Lillia was stumped. She thought for several seconds. “That’s...well, sorry. I have to agree with you there,” she mumbled.

“You don’t have to apologize, Lillia. Obviously it’s not very likely!” Meg declared, fists clenched. “I’ve never dated anyone before! I’m not attractive! I’m average!”

“You don’t have to go that far...”

“So I don’t know what to do! For the past month I’ve been trying to figure out what to say at the newspaper club. Thankfully I was away a lot because of finals, but still!” Meg agonized, and rose to her feet. Lillia held up her hands.

“Calm down, Meg. You’ve been repeating yourself for a while now. And like I said...I think it’d be best if you asked Seron yourself.”

“Y-you’re right. You’re right,” Meg admitted, falling back into her chair. “I never thought I’d end up worrying about something like this. I didn’t think I’d even think about dating until I was a little older.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, the person you date kind of decides your future.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think? Or are things different in Sou Be-II? Is it considered too early if you start dating in secondary school there?”

“Of course! And I went to an all-girls school, too! I couldn’t even think about dating before graduation!”

“Hm. I guess different places have different norms.” Lillia nodded, pouring herself more tea.

Meg finished her cup and glanced at the clock—

“Oh no! I’d better get going. Thanks for listening to me, Lillia. I feel a bit—I mean—a lot better.” She stood. And she put the letter in her bag.

Lillia got up to see Meg to the door, leading the way.

“Not a problem! Happy new year, Meg.”

“Happy new year, Lillia.”

They walked down the hall. Meg pulled on the wool coat hanging from the wall hanger. “It’s cold outside, you don’t have to see me out,” she said, taking off her slippers and switching to her leather shoes.

“Take care, okay? I mean, not like it’s not gonna be safe,” Lillia said, recalling that Meg had an intimidating driver-slash-bodyguard waiting downstairs.

The luxury car that had brought them to Lillia’s house from the school, and would take Meg home, was parked outside the apartment lobby.

“See you at school, okay?” Lillia said, making an effort to sound more cheerful. “You have to ask Seron how he feels about you, face-to-face! That’s the best way to settle this!”

“I will! I trust your judgement, Lillia,” Meg said with a smile. “Bye!”

She opened the door and stepped outside with a wave.

Lillia locked the door and headed for the living room, when she remembered something.

“Oh shoot! I should’ve told her to ask him when they were alone!”

She stopped and turned, staring at the door Meg had just stepped through.

“...Well, I guess that part’s kind of obvious,” she mumbled, going back to the living room.

* * *

A week earlier. The 9th day of the first month.

Seron Maxwell was sitting in a train.

He was in a first-class cabin on a sleeper train bound for the Capital District.

The cabin was built for two, with a door with a glass insert. There was a curtain over the insert for privacy’s sake.

Two sofas were arranged face-to-face in the long, narrow cabin. The sofas could be converted into large beds for use at night.

Seron sat on one of the sofas, wearing a navy jacket and reading a book.

He usually lived in the dorms on campus because his house was so far from the Capital District. Most of the year he spent in the capital, going back home by train for the long holidays.

There was no one else in the cabin.

Seron’s mother once had the displeasure of sharing a cabin with a drunk passenger, so she always made sure that her family traveled single—even if it meant buying an extra ticket.

Seron was on his way back to the Capital District for the new term, which would begin on the 14th.

His grey eyes left the pages for a moment, turning to the window. The world outside was completely still.

The window was foggy with heat and his breaths. All he could see was snow. The snow piled up on the desolate soil, and the snow falling from the sky. It was impossible to tell where the ground ended and the sky began. Such snowfall was rare in these parts.

The train had left Weld the previous evening but met many delays along the way. And several hours ago, it finally came to a complete stop.

His wristwatch told him it was almost evening. Even if the train were to start moving immediately, it would be midnight by the time they reached the Capital District. And the snow showed no signs of stopping.

Seron put his book on hold and took out his agenda to check the date.

In most schools in Roxche, the new term began with the new year. Seron, who would be turning 16 in the third month, was now a fourth-year student.

The 4th Capital Secondary School's opening ceremony was on the 13th. Hundreds of first-years would gather at the school, full of excitement and trepidation.

Those who lived too far to commute to school would move into the dorms two days ahead of time.

Seron had gone through the same thing three years earlier. The incoming first-years would move in their things with their parents, go through orientation, and enjoy dinner together.

The nervous first-years would spend their first night away from home, then attend a school orientation the next day.

Assisting the new students in that process were senior-classmen designated as Resident Assistants, or RAs.

RAs were selected from among high-achieving dormitory students. They would help guide first-years and assist the dormitory manager and the matrons.

There was one designated RA per floor, who each received their own room. The RA's room was larger than the others and was furnished with a table and chairs so students could drop by for long conversations.

Being an RA had its perks—like pay—but more importantly, it was a coveted job because it looked great on university applications. Students had the option to turn down RA offers, but no one ever did.

And this year, Seron had been chosen to serve.

He had to return to the dorms by the morning of the 10th to help greet the incoming first-years, three days earlier than the rest of the dormitory students.

He would have reached the Capital District by now if the train had been on time, but he was only halfway there. And switching to another mode of transport was not an option.

Even if he got off at the next station and switched to an autobahn bus, it might take even longer than the train—and there was no guarantee that buses would be operational in this weather.

In the end, Seron had to remain in his cabin—where comfort, if nothing else, was guaranteed.

He turned his gaze from his agenda to his watch.

Cringing at the thought that he might not make it to the Capital District by morning, Seron pouted as his friend Larry was wont to do.

Suddenly, there was a knock.

“Mr. Maxwell? This is the conductor. May have your permission to enter?”

Seron closed his pocketbook and got up to unlock the door.

The conductor, a man in his fifties wearing a Confederation Rail uniform, took off his hat with a courteous bow.

“My apologies, sir, but we’re experiencing a shortage of snowplows. It may take quite some time before we can resume service.”

“I suppose there’s not much we can do about that,” Seron replied, wondering if the conductor was simply there to apologize.

“And I’m afraid I must make another request,” the conductor said, very politely asking if another passenger could be allowed to share Seron’s cabin.

The conductor explained that the passenger was in a first-class seat, but asked to get a ticket upgrade for a sleeper cabin because the train might not arrive until morning.

Seron thought for a moment before concluding, “as long as they’re not drunk.” The conductor smiled.

“That won’t be a problem at all, sir. One moment, please,” he said, heading off to get the passenger.

As Seron waited, he wondered why the conductor asked him to share the cabin when there was another cabin on the train used by a lone businessman.

But because the information he had was not enough for him to come up with a conclusion, he stopped worrying about it.

Several minutes later, the conductor escorted Seron’s new cabin-mate over.

“Hi there.”

A beautiful woman in her mid-twenties. She wore beige pants and a moss green jacket, her impeccable makeup giving her an air of maturity.

Seron recalled the Whitfield catalogue he had read several months ago and understood to some degree why the conductor had selected him.

“My name is Lisa. Lisa Velvet. It’s nice to meet you,” the woman introduced herself cheerfully. Seron stood with a courteous bow and introduced himself.

A middle-aged man appeared behind Lisa with her luggage and put it down in the cabin.

The man seemed to be a butler or a bodyguard of some sort. He cast Seron a sharp look and disappeared, though it was hard to tell if he was relieved or put on edge.

“This snow is terrible,” Lisa said, taking a seat across from Seron, “I’m not in any hurry myself, but what about you?”

“I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a bind. I have to make it to the dorms by tomorrow.”

“Oh, where do you go to school? Do classes start tomorrow?”

And so, Seron and Lisa chatted away to pass the time.

Seron did not go out of his way to talk, but whenever Lisa asked him about his school or his family, he responded politely. Her eyes widened when he explained that his mother ran Maxwell Frozen Foods.

Lisa, meanwhile, spoke about herself at length without even being asked.

She was the daughter of a rich family that dealt in crude in the Republic of Niasham on the western edge of Roxche. Her hobby was traveling. She visited places alone (though her butler accompanied her), and at her parents’ urging, was looking for a potential husband.

“I’ve been all over Roxche, but I haven’t found the right man. Maybe I’ll just go to Sou Be-Il.”

“I’m surprised you’re having a hard time. You’re very beautiful,” Seron admitted.

“Thank you,” Lisa replied with a wink. “Oh, if only you were 10 years older...”

The train had not gone a single meter forward by the time the sun began to set.

Lisa asked Seron to eat in the dining car with her. And because he had no reason to refuse, they had dinner together. Many curious gazes fell on the odd couple, but Seron paid them no mind as he ate.

The train must have had extra food supplies ready, because they were served a full-course meal—appetizer, meat, fish, and even dessert.

During the meal, the train finally began to move. The passengers cheered.

The train soon stopped at the nearest station.

Some passengers disembarked and headed to hotels, but because the conductor assured them that the train would be at the Capital District by morning, Seron and Lisa elected to remain in their cabin.

The train continued slowly down the tracks, and eventually it was time for lights-out. Seron stepped out of the cabin to give Lisa time to change.

When Seron stepped back into the dark cabin, he saw Lisa sitting on the side of her bed, wearing a set of childlike checkered pajamas.

“You could come sit with me, if you’d like,” Lisa said with a seductive smile, “No one’s ever going to know.”

“No thank you,” Seron replied firmly, taking a seat on his own bed across the cabin—which was still only a meter away from Lisa’s.

“Oh? You’re shyer than I thought. Or are you just not interested in girls?” Lisa asked from her window-side bed, crossing her legs.

“That’s not it,” Seron replied with a shake of the head, “There’s a girl I’m interested in. And someone I respect once said, ‘a real gentleman behaves as though the woman he loves is always watching him’.”

Lisa blinked several times, before breaking out into a smile.

“That is so sweet of you. You’ve got a really great look on your face. Your crush is going to work out well, I guarantee it.”

Then, they each lay in their own beds and fell asleep.

The train continued towards the Capital District in the dark of night.

Chapter 2: The Question

The 19th day of the first month.

Including the weekend, it had been three days since the start of the new term.

It was past three in the afternoon.

It was windy and overcast. Dark, low-hanging clouds covered the sky.

The heavy snowfall from the end of 3305 and beginning of 3306 continued to blanket the grounds of the 4th Capital Secondary School. Pathways had been cleared, but the field was rendered unusable.

Hundreds of students in winter coats moved in a line towards the gates.

It was an after-school traffic jam, a common sight at the school. Hapless first-years were swept up by the crowds and pushed in every direction.

Things had only been made worse by the unusually heavy snowfall and the ice left on the roads. Too often students found their feet buried in snowdrifts or lost their footing and fell.

Far from that commotion stood a certain building.

It was one of the more remote classroom buildings that went unused after school and was therefore nearly empty.

“Man, it’s cold,” Larry Hepburn shivered, unlocking the door of a certain room on the first floor.

Larry had been Seron’s best friend since first year, and was responsible for Seron’s joining the newspaper club.

He had blue eyes, which were common in the Capital District, and a head of short blond hair. And though short, Larry was very muscular. His face was slightly tanned in spite of the season.

He entered the newspaper club’s office. It was about half the size of a regular classroom.

Expensive sofas and a coffee table were set in the middle, with work desks and chairs lined up on the side and long lockers against one of the walls.

On another wall was a kitchenette complete with sink and hot plate, and there was even a telephone—a luxury that most households could afford no more than one of. Further down the wall was a darkroom. The newspaper club likely had the most luxurious office in the entire school.

“Brr...” Larry hung up his coat next to the door and opened the windows with a spring in his step.

Having been locked for 20 days, the office air was stagnant. The smell from the darkroom had seeped into the office as well.

The wind howled in through the window, sweeping away the 3305 air. Larry quickly grabbed a notepad on the desk just as it was about to fly off.

A few minutes later, he shut the windows and turned on the heater.

Hot-water heaters were installed in the building. They were usually turned on all day, but had been shut off for the break.

Larry turned on the large tap on the wall. The hot water from the boiler room flowed into the radiator. He checked it carefully—sometimes hot water would leak from the pipes when the heating was turned on.

Because it took time for the system to heat up the room, Larry also turned on the kerosene stove in the middle of the office. He filled it up with spare oil from the locker and lit it with a match.

Larry was constantly moving.

Next, he put the kettle on the hot plate in the kitchenette. He prepared the teapot and tea leaves, and wiped the coffee table.

His body and the office had warmed up. But no one else arrived.

So Larry reached up to the cabinet to take out the teacups, when—

“Good afternoon. Ah, is no one else here yet, Larry?”

A male student stepped inside.

“Been a while, Nick! You’re the first club member I’ve seen all year,” Larry chuckled, grabbing a second teacup.

Nicholas Browning—also known as Nick—was slender with fair skin, emerald-green eyes, and back-length hair.

If he were not dressed in a boy’s uniform and wearing a jacket with buttons on the right side, he could have easily passed for a girl.

“Thank you for heating up the office,” Nick said with a smile, hanging up his jacket and his coat on the wall.

“Take a seat. I’ll get you some tea.”

“I am in your debt.”

Nick sat down.

Larry—the best tea-brewer in the club—expertly prepared two cups of tea and served them before taking a seat himself.

“Happy new year, Nick.”

“Happy new year, Larry.”

They raised their teacups and raised the first toast of the new year.

They discussed their respective winter breaks between lazy sips of tea.

Because there was no homework over the break, Larry spent most of it doing voluntary military training.

He had gone winter camping and marching with a friend from his military sciences classes and others from a different school. They had marched dozens of kilometers every day on the massive military training grounds with tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear, and food on their backs.

“It must have been exhausting,” Nick commented.

“Nah, but I almost died!” Larry laughed.

The first half of the march had gone smoothly, but things had taken a sudden downturn at the start of the new year with the onset of the unprecedented cold snap.

Larry’s team had been beset by heavy snowfall and cold. They slowed down and could not sleep at night because of the temperatures. Their wet leather shoes almost froze their feet.

“Which means I’m more coldproof than any other year,” Larry said. Even as they cursed the weather, his team had kept their spirits up and finished the training with an optimistic mindset.

They had considered giving up when things had gotten truly perilous, but everyone had persisted even more than they knew they were capable of and made it safely back to the base.

When they returned, the base had been in a state of emergency.

A different team, composed of soldiers from the Confederation Army, had been stranded. The men had inadequate camping gear and their truck had been stopped by snow, and they almost lost their lives. Though soldiers were commonly wary of autumn rainstorms, this uncommon weather event took them completely off-guard.

“So I didn’t get to participate in the new year’s artillery corps training. Nobody died, but there was a big hubbub because it was a show of lax discipline. Man, if only it hadn’t snowed, I’d have learned to use a 150mm howitzer.”

That was all Larry had to say about his break. It was Nick’s turn next.

“I visited the Casna Coast with my family and feasted on the local food—but that’s not the important thing!” Nick exclaimed, sounding unusually excited. “The Ikstova Pass! Surely you must have heard about it on the news, Larry?”

“Oh, yeah! Definitely!” Larry replied, leaning forward.

The Ikstova Pass was a passage announced by the Kingdom of Iks—a country situated on the Central Mountain Range—at the start of the year. The Central Mountain Range had always been thought impassable, but it turned out that the Ikstova Pass led straight from the Kingdom of Iks to Sou Be-Il, the former enemy of Roxche.

“The royal family of Iks kept it under wraps for 400 years, didn’t they?” Larry confirmed. “Cause if the pass was announced, the East would use it to invade the West, and vice-versa later down the line. Makes sense they would hide it.”

“Indeed.”

“Some soldiers I know say it was treason against Roxche to hide the passage, but I think it was the right decision. The conflict between the two sides is what allowed both sides to form peaceful unions, and both sides prospered after unification because they didn’t go to war. Although my ancestors might get mad if they could hear me right now.”

Nick, who had been nodding over his cup of tea, spoke.

“I agree with you, Larry. But what excites me most about the Ikstova Pass is something quite different.”

“Yeah? Like what?” Larry asked, refilling Nick’s teacup.

“The first thing that came to mind when I heard the news was this: that the royal family may not have concealed the existence of the pass.”

“Then what?”

Nick’s eyes narrowed, twinkling.

“I hypothesize that it is the very opposite. That the royal family was created for the very purpose of hiding the existence of the pass. Perhaps the pass was not discovered by the royal family. Rather, the person who discovered it became king.”

“I see...” Larry fell into thought. Nick waited. “The Kingdom of Iks was established 400 years ago, right?”

At the time, the East had been stricken by civil war. But because the West had formed a union and invaded, they agreed to a ceasefire and fought back. This resulted in a long, tiresome war that lasted over 100 years.

“At the time, Iks was the kingdom at the western edge of the East. It had some relations with countries near what is now the Republic of Raputoa, but did not participate in the war. Which is understandable, as battles between the sides mostly raged near the mouth of the Lutoni,” Nick explained.

“Maybe whoever found the pass didn’t want to get involved in the war. So he became king to hide the existence of the pass. That takes a lot of guts,” Larry said, looking off into the distance.

“Actually,” Nick said with a smile, “I had a different hypothesis.”

“Really?”

“This is, of course, a theory. But I propose that Iks’s royal family were actually Westerners who had crossed to the East via the pass.”

“Huh?”

Larry’s eyes flew open. He fell into thought, and eventually nodded.

“Hm...you’re right. That might be possible. I only considered Easterners crossing to the other side, but the opposite is possible too.”

“Indeed.”

“So maybe the people who crossed over were the advance guard of a Western invasion force? And the Kingdom of Iks was a sort of bridgehead to make the invasion easier?”

A bridgehead was a base built on enemy territory to facilitate an invasion. Larry’s considerations were focused mostly on the military aspects of the crossing.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Nick said, “but seeing as no other groups crossed the pass afterwards, and considering the fact that not even the royal family of Iltoa knew of its existence, I speculate that those who crossed over were those who had no choice but to flee into the mountains.”

“Nomads, huh. So you’re saying they tried to live deep in the mountains where no one would find them.”

“They must have risked death to enter the mountain range, and stumbled by chance upon the pass. When they traversed it, they found themselves in what is now the Kingdom of Iks. They may not even have realized that they arrived in the East, simply assuming that there was a community of people living in the Central Mountain Range. And these nomads may have unified the locals into the current kingdom.”

“Mhm.”

“Prior to the founding of the kingdom, the people of Iks lived in small tribes around Lake Ras. Local legends speak of an ancient kingdom, but there is no clear record of this ancient bloodline. The bloodline of the current royal family of Iks, on the other hand, is well-recorded. Perhaps the ancient kingdom—which I suppose could have been no more than a line of chieftains—clashed with the people from across the mountain...” Nick theorized, almost as though telling a compelling story.

“...And were conquered by the people from beyond the mountains,” Larry finished off darkly.

“The new royal family could have altered historical records and made it seem as though the previous kingdom had never existed. They could easily erase evidence or allow evidence to disappear,” Nick added enthusiastically.

“Scary stuff,” Larry said with a shrug.

“Indeed. But of course, this is simply a hypothesis. Perhaps the royal family of Iks truly did spring from its current seat and discover the pass by chance 400 years ago. If one were to divide the world into East and West, they might have been categorized as Easterners.”

“That would be nice. Either way, we’re all from the same roots. The people who left the Mural of the Beacon might have been rolling in their graves if they saw what happened after they died.”

“If we could someday develop a method to determine one’s origins by studying the human body, I’m sure we could figure out a solution to this mystery. Perhaps the blood of Ikstovans and Iltoans share similar characteristics?”

“Maybe one day we’ll find out,” Larry said, getting to his feet with the empty teapot in hand.

Larry was just crossing past the door to the kitchenette when—

“I’m first to the office this year!”

The door slammed open, almost hitting him in the process.

“Whoa!”

“Oh. You’re here, Larry?” asked the girl stepping inside.

“Watch it, Lia!”

“Is your new year’s resolution to not greet anyone anymore?”

Natalia Steinbeck was tall for a girl, with her long brown hair tied up in a ponytail. She wore black-rimmed glasses and a pair of stockings under her skirt.

Her parents were both world-famous musicians, and Natalia followed in their footsteps by taking part in the school’s orchestra club.

Natalia and Larry had been next-door neighbors and childhood friends, though Larry had forgotten the fact by the time they were reunited the previous summer. He alone called her ‘Lia’.

“Didn’t hear a greeting from you, Lia. Happy new year.”

“There’s a good boy. Hey there, Nick. As pretty as ever, I see.”

“Good afternoon, Nat. Happy new year.”

“Happy new year!” Natalia called back, hanging up her coat. “Two sugars, Larry. I need something sweet on a cold day like this.”

“That’s what you usually get,” Larry retorted, though he reached for the sugar anyway.

Natalia took a seat. Nick turned. “Perhaps that was a little harsh of you, Nat. The door was clearly unlocked, and the first thing you say is ‘I’m first to the office’ and ‘you’re here, Larry?’”

“You got me, Nick! Ever the detective. While you’re at it, I need you to dig up why Larry’s such an idiot in the first place.”

“My, my. Larry seems more than intelligent enough,” Nick pointed out. Natalia gave a dramatic gasp.

“WHAT?! How much did he pay you to say that, Nick?”

“You’ve fallen far, Lia. It’s not like people act only for money,” Larry said, putting Natalia’s usual teacup on the table.

“But it’s either money or love, and you don’t have either.”

“That would be *you*, Lia. You’ve never had any love to begin with.”

“Then that just means I’ll have to bring some in person next time to show you! Just you wait, I’ll fill up this office with the scent of my love. Don’t step on it.”

“Yeah, just make sure to take off the price tag before showing it off.”

“Sure, sure. You think the department store by the station’s got some in stock?”

Nick smiled as Larry and Natalia bantered like an old married couple.

“I’d love to take a look at this love of yours next time as well, Nat.”

Larry, Nick, and Natalia had just started on the second pot of tea when the door opened again.

“You’re early. Well, at least the office is nice and toasty.”

Jenny Jones stepped inside.

She had a petite build with short red hair and large brown eyes, and had a large leather bag slung over her shoulder.

Jenny was the heiress to Jones Motors, Roxche’s foremost automaker, and was the one responsible for the luxurious furnishings of the office.

“Hey chief! Happy new year,” said Natalia.

“Good afternoon, Jenny. Happy new year,” said Nick.

“Happy new year, Jenfie,” said Larry. He was the only one who sometimes called her by her childhood nickname of ‘Jenfie’.

“Hi guys. Looks like Seron and Megmica haven’t shown up yet,” Jenny said, putting down her bag and sitting on the sofa.

Larry looked up in the midst of preparing tea. “Almost forgot. Seron’s an RA starting this year,” he said, “He’ll be busy helping the first-years, so sometimes he’ll be late to club or might not show at all.”

“All right,” Jenny replied. Larry poured her tea and toasted yet again.

Jenny seemed to enjoy the tea, but she grumbled.

“I’m so sick and tired of attending parties. It’s so nice to be back at school.”

“Something happen?” asked Natalia.

“Yeah. A bunch of good things.”

“Like what?”

“First, we’ve officially announced our new factory location—and guess what? It’s going to be in Sou Be-Il! So far we’ve only been exporting high-end models, but now we’ll be producing affordable cars for locals.”

Larry was the first to react. “That...is incredible! Jones Motors cars made in the West, that sounds so cool!”

“So,” Jenny continued, “Jones Motors shares went through the roof in the new year.”

“How lovely,” Nick said with a chuckle, “If I’d known ahead of time, I’d have bought as many shares as I could afford.”

“Isn’t that insider trading?” Natalia pointed out. Nick replied that he was simply joking.

“And we had another cause for celebration. I guess this is even better news,” Jenny said with an embarrassed smile, “My cousin and my sister are parents now. They just had a baby girl.”

“WOW! Congrats!” Natalia exclaimed loudly, burying Jenny in a hug.

“Urk.” Jenny groaned, strangled in Natalia’s embrace.

“Congratulations, Jenny. That is indeed wonderful news!” Nick chimed in, being also privy to Jenny’s past. His and Natalia’s congratulations were directed not at Jenny’s cousin and sister, but at her, for announcing the news in front of the others.

Larry, however, simply thought that Jenny was announcing the happy news of a relative’s birth. “That’s great! Good for them!”

“You’re crushing me, Nat,” Jenny strained, disentangling herself from Natalia. “Thanks, guys. So our family’s been busy both publicly and privately for the past few weeks. So many more people have been coming to visit, and we’ve been attending parties one after another. We were so busy we had to cancel our annual family trip, but that turned out to be a good thing because of all the snow,” Jenny said, and changed the subject, “That’s enough about my family. Let’s talk about the club.”

She took out a stack of envelopes from her bag and tossed them haphazardly on the table.

There were over 10 envelopes of varying sizes and colors. All had been opened with a letter opener.

“What’s this, chief?” Natalia asked.

“I found these in my locker when I opened it this morning. Seeing as none of them show signs of having reproduced out of nowhere, we can safely assume that people have been leaving these there.”

“Are they love letters?”

“They’re addressed to the newspaper club. Have a read.”

The others each picked up an envelope and took out the letters inside.

“Let’s see here,” said Larry, “‘hello newspaper club, I’m a second-year hotshot and I have a crush on this girl in my class. Please investigate her and see if she likes me too! She probably does. Feel free to write an article about us if we end up getting together!’”

Then it was Natalia’s turn. “‘The stray cat that used to live in my neighborhood’s disappeared. Please find the cat’.”

Then, Nick. “This is quite the interesting message. ‘I’m a sixth-year student. Please tell me how to get rich without going to university. What would be the right career for me? What if I became a day trader? I have a bit of seed money for investing’.”

“What are all these?” Larry wondered, pouting.

“Requests for the newspaper club.”

“And they’re all like this?”

“Uh-huh. After the last couple of issues, it looks like people have started thinking of us as detectives or private investigators.”

Natalia flung the letter she was holding. “What are we, their personal servants? ...Some of them are pretty interesting though.”

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll take on a couple of these,” Jenny said, “More tea please, Larry.”

“Right.”

Larry got up and began pouring Jenny some tea, when—

“Sorry I’m late.”

Seron Maxwell entered the office.

Instead of a school bag, Seron was carrying a large paper bag. He greeted the others one by one and was greeted in turn. Then he hung up his coat and sat on the sofa.

The club toasted yet again with tea.

“I was busy helping out the first-years at the dorms. ...I thought I’d be the last one here,” Seron said blankly, discreetly noting that the person he wanted to see most was absent.

“Strauski’s coming to club today,” Natalia said. Seron nodded.

He set the topic of Megmica aside for the moment and asked the others about their break. Then he explained what he did over the holidays.

That he spent time with this family, and was dragged out shopping by his sister. That his sister would start attending secondary school in Weld.

Then he briefly detailed how his train to the Capital District had been delayed by snow, and how he narrowly made it back to the dorms on time.

Finally, he confessed that taking care of first-years as an RA was harder than he had expected, and that quite a few first-years were still learning the ropes.

“I might not be at the office as often as last year,” he said, “I’m sure I won’t be as busy once the first-years start getting used to living on campus, but I can’t say when that’ll be. We have mandatory meetings after class for a while so I definitely won’t be able to come to the newspaper club then.”

“You’re always so good at explaining things, Seron,” Natalia said, “See, Larry? This is what it means to—”

“To be smart, right? You could learn a thing or two, Lia.”

“Tch! You win this round, Hepburn.”

Seron took out a large case from the paper bag and placed it at the center of the coffee table. It was packaged in colorful wrapping paper.

“These cookies have been really popular lately in Weld. I thought they’d complement the tea here.”

“FOOD!” Natalia screamed, her eyes glinting. She was excited enough to eat the case of cookies whole, wrapping paper and all.

“Whoa there, Lia.” Larry reached out and carefully unwrapped the case.

Under the wrapping paper was a large tin with a picture of a beautiful mansion. Packed inside were over a hundred assorted cookies. Cookies with sugar on top or jam in the center, chocolate cookies, and even ones shaped like ovals or different animals.

“They look wonderful.” “Thanks for the snack.” “Not bad, buddy. They’ll definitely go well with the tea,” Nick, Jenny, and Larry commented. Natalia, however, shook her head gravely.

“This is great and all, but what’s the rest of you gonna eat?”

“Sorry, Nat. This one tin is for all of us. I can get you some more next time if you like it,” Seron replied, also completely serious. Larry sighed.

“Just buy her an extra tin next time, Seron. One big enough to be a suitcase.”

“Sometimes you say smart things, Larry,” Natalia said, fixing her glasses.

“And fill the tin with sand and gravel. She’d eat it anyway.”

“I take that back!” Natalia fumed, “Larry, you’re a failure when it comes to women. Sidddown over there.”

“I’ve been sitting for a while now.”

Jenny ignored the banter and picked up a cookie. “Thanks, Seron.”

Nick also reached for a cookie. “It seems nothing has changed over the break.”

The cookies had been reduced to a fifth of their original number, largely thanks to Natalia. The door opened again.

“Good afternoon, everyone.”

The last member entered.

“Hey there, Megmica! Pigtails again, eh?” “Happy new year!” “Happy new year.” “Happy new year, Megmica. C’mon in.”

Natalia, Larry, Nick, and Jenny greeted her in turn. Megmica responded to them all with smiles, but—

“It’s been a while. Happy new year.”

To Seron alone, she gave a rigid look.

“Oh, yes.”

“Hm?” “Huh?”

Larry and Jenny noticed Meg’s unusual attitude, but Natalia interrupted.

“Take a seat! We got cookies!”

A smile returned to Meg’s face. She hung up her coat and even took off her jacket because the office was so warm. She set her jacket and bag aside and took her usual seat on the sofa.

“Maybe it was just my imagination,” Larry said to himself, brewing more tea.

Natalia wasted no time in asking Meg about her break. Meg replied just as quickly as the questions came.

She explained that the aeroplane did not crash on the way to her hometown and back, that the engines never failed, and that her hometown—though she had missed it dearly—was so different from Roxche that she experienced culture shock again.

After the first round of questions and answers, Jenny spoke up.

“Anyway, I’m glad to see you all here today.”

“Giving us a new year’s speech, chief?” asked Natalia.

“Yep. So listen up.”

Jenny put her teacup on the table and stood with her head held high.

“This year—”

“Before this! I have a question I wish to ask!”

The sudden interruption came from Meg.

“Huh?” Jenny intoned, sounding unusually taken aback.

The others were all stunned into silence by Meg’s sharp voice—though Natalia continued to reach for another cookie.

“Oh, I spoke in a loud voice. I have surprised everyone. I am sorry,” Meg said. Jenny shook her head.

“Don’t worry about it. Keep going.”

“I am sorry. But...I wish to solve this matter quickly. So I will ask now.”

“Yeah, no sense in putting off something urgent.”

“Yes. In Sou Be-Il a saying is ‘if you pick up an egg, break it now’.”

“Yeah, you can’t exactly make an omelette out of a chick. And considering the temperature in here, a chick would hatch pretty quickly. So what’s on your mind, Megmica?” Jenny asked, falling into the sofa. All eyes fell on Meg.

Seron’s blank gaze was directed at Meg, as usual. Grateful for the fact that he could speak with her and see her in person every day at school, he reminded himself that he would lend an ear no matter what problems plagued her.

“Does anyone think that Seron is in love with me?”

Everyone froze.

Chapter 3: The Storm

Seconds passed by in cold silence, as though an ice age had come over the office.

The sound of the kettle Larry left on the stove and the second hand on the wall clock ticking away punctuated the air in a din.

“Hm? Why is everyone not speaking?” Meg asked, surprised, “Is my Roxchean speaking very strange?”

The first one to defrost was Larry, who had recently undergone wintertime training.

“N-no, it’s fine. I think we all get what you’re trying to say.”

“Really? Thank goodness,” Meg breathed a sigh of relief. Next to thaw out was Natalia, who had taken in more calories than anyone else.

“Er...Megmica?”

“Yes? What is it, Natalia?”

“You’re a brave soul.”

“Pardon?”

“Not a lot of people have the guts to ask something like that—in front of a bunch of people, at that. Mhm. It’s good to be brave!”

“Is it good?”

“Uh-huh! At least, I think so,” Natalia nodded, almost like an old man watching a grandchild grow up. But she did not answer Meg’s original question.

Next to speak was Nick, who had not actually been frozen. “I believe it would be best to ask the man himself, don’t you agree? Thankfully for us, he is right here in this office,” he said, tossing Meg and Seron an angelic smile.

“That is pure evil...” Larry muttered to himself.

Finally, Jenny—who had no reason to be frozen to begin with—turned. “That’d be for the best. Answer the question, Seron,” she said as though it were the most natural thing in the world, “I have a speech cooked up for today, so make it quick.”

“You’re all evil...” Larry breathed silently. Slowly, imperceptibly, he turned to look at his best friend.

Seron was a statue. He didn’t blink, and it was impossible to tell if he was even breathing.

Larry glimpsed Jenny reach for her bag. She picked up her camera for a moment, but seemed to bring herself under control as she put it back down.

Larry and Jenny looked at Seron.

Natalia looked at Seron.

Nick looked at Seron.

Meg also looked at Seron.

Seron took a deep breath and finally said in Roxchean,

“Wh-whatever might you mean?”

Inwardly, Larry sighed and shook his head, but he did not let anything show.

No one said a word, waiting for Meg to respond.

Calmly, with a voice trained from years in the chorus club, Meg clarified—

“It was last year’s event, but the newbie sent me a letter. This letter wrote that Seron is in love with me. I must confirm these words no matter what.”

‘The newbie? Seriously?’ Larry wondered, incredulous, but said nothing. His trained gaze caught a hint of a grin playing at Jenny’s lips. *‘It was you, Jenfie!’* he quickly concluded, only narrowly managing to keep himself from speaking.

“Hm. I see,” Seron replied, as monotonous as ever.

‘Just say it, buddy! Now’s your only chance!’ Larry pleaded inwardly. He tried to meet Seron’s gaze and sent him all the telepathic signals his brain could muster.

All eyes were on him. Seron finally responded with his usual poker face—

“I don’t know what the newbie’s talking about.”



"I understand!" Meg replied brightly with a sigh of relief, "Everyone, and Seron, I am sorry. I have said something strange. I will end this talk with this."

"Oh. That's it?" Natalia inquired, not completely satisfied.

"I suppose if the parties involved have nothing more to say..." Nick said, as elegant as ever.

"As president, I have no objections," Jenny said, putting extra emphasis on 'president'.

Larry said nothing. Seron said nothing. They simply listened as Meg's cheerful voice resounded through the office.

"But it is a relief that this is the newbie's mistake."

"Hm? Why's that, Megmica?" Natalia asked. Meg's answer was immediate.

"That is because, I cannot say 'yes' to a person who cannot confess in person himself. A confession is a thing to say and listen to in person. If this was not the newbie's mistake I would dislike Seron."

Four seconds later.

"I just remembered. I have to go buy something."

Seron Maxwell slowly got to his feet and grabbed his coat off the wall. And without another word, he drifted out of the office like a phantom.

"Oh, er... Whoops! I gotta get something, too! I'll come with you, Seron!"

Larry Hepburn struggled to gather his things before hurrying after him.

Four people were left in the office.

* * *

Seron was running under the frozen sky.

His unbuttoned coat flapping, he sprinted across the wet tiles.

Larry was following after him.

The after-school rush was over, and few students were left on the grounds.

"Hey, isn't that SC Seron, the RA?" "Yeah. He's really good at explaining things, don'tcha think?"

A pair of first-years spotted Seron and Larry.

"Yeah. Wonder why he's running?"

"Didn't you know, Paul? Apparently SC Seron runs laps around campus every day to get in shape!"

"Uh-huh. What about the other guy?"

"Must be a friend who wants to be like him. SC Seron looks faster, though."

"That makes sense! You're really smart, Julio."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. But if you got any questions, I'd be happy to answer. We're friends now!"

"Yeah!"

Without a glance at the budding friendship between Paul and Julio, Seron sprinted out the gates.

He passed the deserted roundabout and ran down the snowy sidewalk. With the campus wall on his left he raced in a straight line towards the city center.

“Wait, Seron! You don’t need to run anymore! Stop!” Larry cried behind him.

Eventually, Seron’s flight finally came to an end.

“Hah...hah...”

Face drenched in sweat and breath rising in white puffs from his mouth, Seron put his hands on his knees.

Larry stood next to him.

“You’ve gotten faster, buddy. Stamina’s gone up too.” He wiped the sweat off his brow with his sleeve, and leaned down to look at Seron’s bowed face.

Seron wore a strange look.

Though he seemed as calm and collected as ever, his eyes alone were dead. As though he were a doll with grey marbles for eyes. He was not crying.

“Phew...”

Larry looked up, gave Seron a hearty slap on the back, and asked in a casual tone, “So, where are we off to? What do you want to get, buddy?”

Seron remained quiet for some time, before finally responding in a muted voice.

“A time machine...”

“...I wouldn’t know where to get one of those around here. How ‘bout some soup instead? You know the soup stand in the shopping district?” Larry said, giving Seron a gentle push. Seron buttoned up his coat and took out his gloves from his pockets.

They walked down the wet, snowy sidewalk for some time in silence.

Eventually, Seron opened his mouth.

“I was going to tell her...” he muttered, looking ahead. There was no one else around to hear.

“Huh? Oh—”

“I couldn’t say it in front of everyone. So I was going to wait until we were alone. I thought that would solve everything...”

“It’s okay, buddy. No one could think straight in a situation like that, you know?”

Larry cast a resentful gaze at the sky. The clouds passed by as quickly as ever.

“Look, Seron. You can’t cry over spilled milk. Don’t blame Je- I mean, the newbie.”

“I know. It’s not the newbie’s fault. It’s mine. I’m the one who couldn’t work up the courage to tell her, putting things off for months. So this is all my fault, and I’m the one who has to solve this situation.”

“Yeah! Think positive.”

“But she hates me now. It’s over. I’m done,” Seron said blankly, almost sounding like he was about to cry.

“I take back what I just said,” Larry said quietly.

They reached a large intersection. Next to the intersection was a park featuring an old decorative cannon.

Crossing a thin layer of snow, Seron approached the old cannon.

“What’s wrong, buddy?”

As Larry watched curiously, Seron stuck his head into the muzzle of the century-old weapon.

“I’m finished, Larry. Just shoot me.”

His voice resounded through the barrel.

“Sorry, Seron,” Larry said, “I still haven’t learned to use one of these babies yet.”

Seron, shoulders sagging, did not remove his head from the cannon. Larry shrugged. At that moment, it began to snow.

It was snowing so hard that if it had been warmer, they would have been instantly soaked to the bone. The snow piled up mercilessly on Seron and Larry’s heads and shoulders. The world, the cannon, and the two of them turned white.

“Looks like we’re in for a storm,” Larry muttered, looking up at the sky.

A snowflake landed on his eye and melted instantly.

* * *

Right after Seron and Larry left the office—

“Could’ve done their shopping earlier, those punks. The chief hasn’t given her speech,” Natalia said, picking up a cookie. “Oh well. More food for me.”

“I will eat too!” Meg cried, her slender arm reaching into the tin. “Hmph.”

She took a handful of cookies and placed them on her lap. Then, to everyone’s surprise, she grabbed the cookies with her other hand and stuffed them into her mouth.

“One of your techniques, Nat?” asked Nick. Natalia shook her head.

“I don’t eat like that.”

“Pardon. You’re not quite so reserved when it comes to eating.”

As Meg finished off her first handful of cookies, Jenny spoke.

“So the newbie wrote you a letter saying that stuff, huh. It’s certainly a surprising claim.”

“It is very surprising! I was very surprised! I was thinking for a long time, but it is finally solved so I am happy,” Meg replied nonchalantly.

“Say, Megmica?” Natalia asked, tone no different from usual.

“Yes! What is the matter?”

“What did the letter say, specifically? Mind letting us in on the details?”

“What I said is all,” Meg replied, but she soon explained the situation.

“Hm.” Natalia fell into thought. She thought without eating a single cookie. In the meantime, Meg downed five.

Finally, Natalia turned to Meg with a smile.

“Y’know, maybe Seron didn’t mean what he said.”

“Pardon?”

“Maybe...maybe he does like you, Megmica. He’s hard to read, y’know. He mighta been too shy to speak up. Maybe you should go talk to him again in person.”

Nick and Jenny were floored. The former blinked rapidly, and the latter stared as though looking at an exotic animal. They had not expected Natalia to take Seron’s side.

Meg was also shocked, stunned into silence.

“Whaddaya say?” Natalia asked, looking Meg in the eye.

“Th-th-th!”

She stuttered, repeating the same sound.

“That a spell witches cast in Sou Be-Il?”

“No!”

“Then?”

“I wished to say, ‘that is impossible!’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“My meaning is, that it is impossible that Seron is in love with me!” Meg declared, but Natalia grinned.

“You sure about that?”

“Let us suppose something!”

“Your Roxchean’s gotten better. Good for you.”

“Thank you! Let us suppose that this is a possibility. But I will not say it first! To be honest, isn’t it bad? Let us suppose that Seron is in love with me, but he cannot confess it in person—”

Meg’s expression turned cold.

“—I cannot marry then! My future will be worrisome!” she declared, picking up another cookie and chewing on it rapidly.

“‘Marry’? Did I just hear ‘marry’, not ‘bury’?” asked Natalia.

“Marry. To become a husband and a wife.”

“Oh, so why couldn’t you marry him?”

“It is simple. Thinking of our age, to date is to pledge our future together! There is no other way! There is nothing else.”

“Ah, I see where you are coming from,” Nick said, nodding.

“You sure about that, Megmica?” asked Natalia. “It’s true a lot of people end up marrying whoever they were dating in secondary school, but a lot of other people break up and end up with someone else. Is it a custom over in the West to marry the first person you go out with? D’you know, chief?”

Jenny shrugged.

With no care for cultural differences in marriage, Meg continued.

“For my future husband, I wish for a clear, decisive person. I like a person who can say his opinions with his own mouth. I dislike people who ask me to notice from their attitudes! I cannot accept it!” Meg fumed. “...I am thirsty.”

She carefully brought her teacup to her lips and downed the tepid tea in one go. Then—

“I-I must show my face to the chorus club once in a while, or they may forget me. Please excuse me today!” she declared, and stood.

“All right,” said Jenny, “Come back when you have the time.”

“Yes. Good day!”

Saying goodbye to the others, Meg grabbed her coat and marched out the door.

For about 20 seconds, the office was silent.

The first to finally speak—as though amused—was Nick.

“And now Megmica has fled on us. There’s never a dull day at the newspaper club.”

“What are you, the peanut gallery?” Natalia said. “Gotta agree, though. Marriage, huh. I’ve never thought about that stuff. Maybe they do things differently in the West.”

“I didn’t think Seron would run off like that,” Jenny sighed with an incredulous look, crossing her legs precariously. She leaned back and stared into the ceiling. “Man...”

“Looks like your plan just went up in smoke.” “Indeed.”

Jenny looked down again.

“What are you talking about?”

“Now, now, don’t play dumb. You’re the one who got the newbie to write that letter.”

“There is no other possibility. I wouldn’t expect such a thing out of Larry, for instance.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jenny repeated herself. Natalia held out a cookie.

“Say ahh.” She pushed a sheep-shaped cookie towards Jenny’s mouth and continued. “So now you’re gonna play the villain alone? You’re being so selfless, chief. Here’s your reward.”

Without a word, Jenny took a bite out of the cookie. She picked up the fallen remainder from her skirt and munched on it as well.

“I wonder where Seron and Larry could be,” Nick mused, casting a glance out the window. It had started snowing earlier, painting the ground and the world pure white.

Natalia picked up yet another cookie. “I bet they’re out having soup.”

“Soup?” “Why?” Nick and Jenny asked simultaneously.

“There’s this nice soup stand in the area that Larry’s parents used to take him to whenever he cried.”

* * *

<So Strauski Megmica completely blew up at our handsome idiot Seron Maxwell. She completely lost her cool, all at the very first meeting of the year.>

<...>

<Even I wasn’t expecting her to ask Seron in front of us all. I had to pick up my jaw off the floor.>

<...>

<I mean, Seron probably would have managed somehow if it was just the two of them.>

<...Well, that’s certainly something big. I...I don’t know what to say, SC Jenny.>

<Huh? Oh, no. That’s not it, newbie.>

<What do you mean?>

<I’m just getting started. The big thing didn’t happen for a while after that.>

<Then...>

<We’ve still got a long way to go.>

<...>

<So things got awkward between poor, supposedly-rejected Seron Maxwell and our oblivious Strauski Megmica. They were both so busy they never really got to meet at the office, and they couldn’t say a word to each other at school.>

<A-and?>

<The days went by in a flash, and before we knew it it was almost the end of the month.>

* * *

The 27th day of the first month.

An object called Seron Maxwell was sitting on the office sofa.

It sat at the edge of the seat, dressed in a school uniform, blankly looking up at the ceiling. Other than the occasional blink, it showed no signs of life.

Meanwhile, Larry, Natalia, and Nick sat around a desk with textbooks and notebooks open. From the darkroom came the muffled sounds of Jenny working on something.

Snow was falling softly outside the wet window. The cloud cover was so thick that the office lights all had to be turned on.

The year had not only come to a cold start, but a snowy one as well. As soon as temperatures rose enough for the snow to melt, it snowed yet again.

The Capital District had mild winters and low precipitation, which was one reason why the area was selected as the capital. But this year it was stricken by unusual weather patterns.

The world outside the window was covered in snow.

The grounds behind the building were buried to the point that it would be impossible to walk across. Even the legendary oak tree stood frozen.

The minute hand crept along the face of the clock and pointed at 4:33 in the afternoon.

Seron staggered to its feet.

"I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be fine on my own..." it trailed off weakly, drifting out of the office. Because the hallways and the bathrooms were also heated, it did not take its coat.

Once Seron had gone, Natalia looked up from her homework—specifically, from the homework Nick was guiding her through—and turned to her fellow student.

"Larry."

"Yeah?"

"Do something about that dark, mooney, handsome creature from hell. You're friends, right?"

"Do...what exactly?"

"Find him some other pretty girl so he can forget Megmica. Or make him take some medicine that erases his memories."

"Why don't you do that?"

"Look, I may be pretty, but I can't go out with Seron."

"I was suggesting we feed him that obliviousness-inducing drug your brain seems to make on its own, Lia."

"I was suggesting you grow out your hair and put on a dress and become his girlfriend."

"Again, that's your job. You were always great at pretending to be a girl."

"That hurt, Larry. You broke my heart."

"I'm surprised you know that expression. Do you even know what it means?"

"Aha! If I took this case to court right now, I bet I'd win."

"Whatever."

Finally, Nick spoke up with an elegant smile. “There is nothing we can do in this particular case but sit back and watch, I’m afraid.”

Larry pursed his lips, but he eventually came around.

“Once a girl gets mad at you,” Natalia said, “It ain’t easy to change her mind. If a relationship doesn’t work out, we girls cut off the thing in one go. Apparently guys can’t, though.” She took out a round tin from her bag and grabbed a piece of chocolate from inside, tossing it into her mouth. “FYI, these chocolates are part of my soul. You can’t have any!”

“I don’t *want* any. And that is one cheap soul you’ve got.”

“You can’t judge a product by how much it costs in the store, Larry. One bite of this chocolate, and you’ll become as clean and pure as I am.”

“I don’t need any poison, thanks,” Larry declined, and stood. “Let’s take a break. Tea, anyone?”

As Larry departed, Nick spoke.

“Come to think of it, have you heard that the date has been decided for the 13th day of the fourth month?”

“For what?”

“Pardon me. The spring dance party.”

“Oh, that.”

A complicated expression rose to Larry’s eyes as he poured cold water into the kettle.

The spring dance party was an annual event held by secondary schools in and around the Capital District. In a way it was an educational event for young elites to learn to fraternize in high society.

Students had to be in their fourth year or higher to participate. In other words, the newspaper club members were now all eligible.

Because the party was hosted by the school, students could dress up in fancy clothes, stay out late with their boyfriends and girlfriends, and enjoy great food, music, and dances all with their parents’ implicit permission.

A condition for attendance, however, was to be registered with a date of the opposite sex at least 10 days before the event.

Every year there were unfortunate students who failed to find a date, left to watch enviously as their friends attended the party—and a large proportion of them were fourth-years, for whom it would be their first year of being eligible to attend.

“Will you be attending with someone, Larry?” asked Nick.

Larry meticulously wiped off every droplet of water from the kettle before putting it on the hot plate and turning on the switch. Then he replied, “If there’s a saintly girl out there who’d be willing to dance with me, yeah. But that’s not what you’re getting at, is it?”

Nick smiled.

Larry returned to the desk and lowered his voice. “Look. I want Seron to go to the dance with Megmica as much as anybody. But he’s not in any shape to be asking her.”

“Indeed. So what shall we do? Presently Seron is but an empty husk. I recall gathering such husks as a child and decorating trees with them, but that certainly isn’t an option for us.”

It was hard to tell if Nick was worried or amused by the situation, but ultimately he seemed to feel a mix of both.

“There’s not much we can do,” Larry admitted, “but hope for a miracle.”

“If Megmica’d show up more often, they might be able to talk it out,” Natalia said, serious for once, “But she’s really giving the chorus club her all. Running away from us.”

That was when someone knocked on the door.

Seron was plodding back down the hallway when it spotted the open office door and Natalia’s head sticking out of it.

“Welcome back, Seron Maxwell. We are presently hosting a VIP by the name of Strauski for tea.”

Natalia did not often use such a tone of voice. But Seron was more affected by the content of her words.

“Ah!”

Holding back the urge to turn tail and run off, Seron quickly strode to the door.

“Come right in,” Natalia said, making way—

“Hiya, Big Bro! It’s been a while!”

Twelve-year-old Strauski Kurt gave Seron a smile and a wave.

Seron stood with jaw on the ground, swaying like a metronome.

“I didn’t lie, did I?” Natalia said innocently.

“Nat...I see now. You were the devil.”

Strauski Kurt was one of Meg’s brothers. She had an even younger brother named Johan who was now 10 years old.

Kurt had started attending his sister’s school this year, coming to class with her in the morning by car. After class, he let Meg take the car and took the streetcar home.

He was still quite short, only at about Jenny’s height. Kurt had fair skin and dark eyes just like his sister, and black hair cut short.

He looked—and was—outgoing and playful.

The Strauski family had come to the school in 3305 to listen to Meg at the drama club’s fall performance. The entire newspaper club met them there.

“So this is the newspaper club! It’s just as ritzy as Big Sis said it was!” Kurt exclaimed in Roxchean from the sofa, eyes glinting.

Nick and the others were sitting on the sofas for tea. Jenny was at the darkroom door, also looking quite surprised.

Seron took a seat on the sofa, in the middle as always—but this time, facing not Megmica but her brother.

“How’s school going for you, Kurt?” asked Larry.

“Great! I got lots of classes, the cafeteria food’s awesome, the uniforms are cool, and there’s lotsa kinds of people around,” Kurt replied with a grin. “Big Bro Larry! You gotta give me your military sciences superintendence! First-years can’t take any courses!”

Kurt’s dream was to join the Sou Be-Il Royal Army’s cavalry.

“All right! I’d be happy to help. I can lend you some of my old textbooks if you want to get a leg up on the others before second year,” Larry replied, smiling at the descendant of his ancestors’ enemies.

“Thanks!”

“Your Roxchean is very good, Kurt. You sound like a native speaker,” Nick commented.

“Thanks! I got in trouble with the teacher for not using proper language, though. I use Roxchean at home too. But Big Sis and Mom don’t like it cause they wanna be comfortable at home. Dad and Johan don’t mind, though, so it’s boys versus girls at our house! Boys use Roxchean, girls use Bezelese!”

“You guys are a riot. Here, have some chocolate,” Natalia said, holding out her tin.

“Whoa! Thanks, Big Sis Nat! Can’t believe you’re allowed to bring snacks to class in secondary school. This rocks!”

Kurt picked up two of the eight remaining pieces. Larry turned to Nick with a smile, shrugging, but Kurt did not understand the meaning behind his gesture.

“Good, good. Eat up, kiddo. So how’s your first month here been? Made any friends?”

“Hmm...not as many as I wanted. And I couldn’t pick a club either.”

“Oh? How many friends have you made so far?”

“Let’s see...I got addresses and numbers and promised to hang out with...”

Kurt reached into his slightly-large uniform jacket and pulled out a brand-new student agenda.

The 4th Capital Secondary School’s student agenda was expensive, as evidenced by the leather cover. Kurt flipped through the pages until he reached the address book.

“Fifty-seven people.”

“Wow!” “Not bad.” “Hm.”

Natalia, Larry, and Nick were floored. Jenny cast Kurt a discreet glance as she sipped on her tea. Seron, still as ghostly as ever, remained seated silently on the sofa.

“Not much, huh?” Kurt sighed.

“Are you kidding?” Larry retorted, “Fifty-seven friends in your first month of secondary school! That’s a lot!”

“But there’s hundreds of first-years at school. Fifty-seven’s not much at all,” Kurt reasoned, confused.

“It’s certainly an incredible number,” said Nick, “Even as a fourth-year, I don’t believe I have so many friends.”

“Something to be proud of, that’s for sure,” Natalia said with a nod. “So what’s your secret? They all guys? Or girls?”

“Why do you have to be so extreme, Lia?”

“Perhaps they are all teachers.”

“No way, Nick!”

Kurt thought for a moment before responding.

“Hmm...about half and half—no, maybe a few more girls.”

“Whoo! You little ladykiller, you! I thought it’d be harder for you to get contact info from girls than guys—that’s what usually happens with first-years. So what’s your secret? Tell us all so that Roxche’s Least Popular Guy here can learn a thing or two,” Natalia said, pointing at Larry.

“Hey! It’s true, but you don’t have to rub it in,” Larry replied, “And I admit I’m kinda curious too. How’d you do it, Kurt?”

Kurt's response was simple.

"Okay, so here's what you do. Talk to the girl for a bit, and then thank her and make sure to say at the end, 'I love you'! It's that easy."

Larry went silent, his eyes turning to dinner plates.

"Pfft!" Natalia, on the other hand, burst into laughter. "Ahahaha! Hahahaha! That is amazing! And totally impossible for Larry! Ahaha!"

As Natalia's laughter continued in the background, Nick smiled. "That's certainly impressive."

"It's nice that you can be honest about it," said Jenny.

Seron silently sipped on some tea.

Once she had recovered from her laughing fits, Natalia put her hands gravely on Kurt's shoulders. "But remember this, young man. If things go wrong, you may end up having to court every one of those girls. There will be tough times and challenges ahead."

Though Natalia was positively gigantic in comparison to him, Kurt was not the least bit cowed.

"If that happens, I can just be happy with all of them!" he replied.

"Good answer, boy! I have nothing left to teach you."

"No! I still have so much to learn, master!"

"Then head west, young man! Head west and learn all that the world has to offer."

"But I just got back from the west a couple of weeks ago!"

"Then east it is! Now depart on your journey of manhood!"

Larry shook his head and poured Seron another cup of tea. Seron quietly gave him a word of thanks.

"By the way," Kurt said, changing the subject, "Er..."

He thought for a moment before turning to Jenny.

"My sister's been acting strange recently, SC Jones. Do you by any chance know why?"

Natalia, Larry, and Nick waited in confusion. Seron, who was studying Bezelese, recognized the words 'sister' and 'strange' and flinched.

Jenny, who could understand Bezelese, replied, "You should ask in Roxchean if you want the answer. A question involving the newspaper club should be asked to the entire newspaper club."

"Okay. Thank you," Kurt replied politely, and switched to Roxchean. "So, er...my sister's been acting real weird. D'you know why?"

Natalia, Larry, and Nick exchanged glances.

"Oh, so that's what it was?" Natalia said, "I was sure you and Jenny were just plotting to throw me a surprise potluck."

"Ignore her, Kurt. So what exactly do you mean by 'weird'? We can't really tell because she's been so busy with the chorus club recently."

"Well, er...it was right after the term started. She used to tell me and Johan about the newspaper club all the time before that, but now she doesn't."

"I see. And?" asked Jenny.

"Her stories were really fun, so Johan and me really liked them. And we asked her why she stopped telling us."

“And how did she respond?” asked Nick.

“That’s the thing, she won’t respond. She’s never like that. And she looks tired for some reason too.”

“Such a sweet brother,” Jenny muttered to herself.

“You don’t know either, Big Bro Seron? You think there’s any way to make her feel better?” Kurt asked, looking Seron in the eye.

“I...er...I’m not sure,” Seron said with a shake of the head.

“Why the focus on Seron, Kurt?” asked Nick.

“Cause my sister usually talks about him the most. She says Big Bro Seron’s so smart he can answer any question. But when I ask about him now, she’s like, ‘Seron has nothing to do with this!’ and gets really angry. I thought he might know why.”

The 12-year-old was both curious and commendable.

“I-I need to go to the bathroom.”

On the other hand, the 15-year-old in love with the 12-year-old’s older sister quietly stood and fled from the office.

“Man...”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Too much tea, do you suppose?”

“What an idiot.”

The others sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Kurt asked, still in the dark.

“Well, that’s how it is,” said Natalia, “A girl your sister’s age is bound to have secrets. And sometimes changes like that happen out of nowhere. So don’t pry too much. That’s what family’s s’posed to do. You’re a good kid; don’t ask her about the newspaper club or Seron for now. And don’t tell her you came to see us.”

“Hmm...okay. I got it. And I’ll tell Johan what you told me too. Thanks for everything!” Kurt nodded. “Bye, everyone! Thanks for the chocolate and tea!”

He left with a wave.

Larry saw him off and shut the door, then turned to Natalia.

“Just out of curiosity, is that supposed to be magic chocolate or something?”

“You bet it is! None for you, though.”

“I’m good. But—”

“But?”

“Share some with Seron when he gets back.”

“It ain’t gonna work on someone as pure as him.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Seron the Pure returned to the office.

“That was one long bathroom break. Do guys take forever in there too? Kurt left awhile ago to look at more clubs,” said Natalia.

“I see...” Seron said mechanically, sitting on the sofa blankly on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry I got all of you involved.”

“We’re not the ones you should be apologizing to,” Jenny snapped without a hint of mercy.

Larry quietly brewed Seron a cup of tea. He put it on the coffee table.

Seron thanked Larry and took two sips.

Determination rose to his grey eyes.

“No, I’m really sorry that I dragged you into this too. To tell you the truth...there’s something I’ve been hiding from everyone but Larry.”

“Oh?” “Like what?” “Do tell.”

Natalia, Jenny, and Nick leaned forward. Larry sat silently beside Seron.

“I don’t want things to be so awkward in the club anymore. So—this might be a shock, but I’ll tell you. Please don’t tell anyone else.”

“Oho.” “Of course.” “Sure.”

Seron steeled himself—not that a stranger would be able to tell—and declared blankly:

“I’ve had a crush on Megmica since I first met her in class last year.”

“We know.” “We knew that.” “We’ve known for a while.”

Seron’s jaw dropped.

“It was pretty obvious,” said Natalia, “You looked like you were enjoying yourself in the club.”

“Especially at the camp in Ercho Village,” Nick added.

“You’d have to be really dense to not see it,” Jenny said with a nod.

“Hm? Huh? Whaaaaaat?”

Seron’s hands were on his head as he floundered in confusion. Larry sighed loudly.

“Don’t even think about running to the bathroom again!” Jenny admonished Seron, “We’ve all known for a while about your crush on Megmica. We know you were too scared to tell her how you felt, and we understand why you ran off that day. It was still stupid, though.”

Seron could not respond.

“Unfortunately for you, Megmica *is* dense enough to not notice. She probably didn’t have an inkling until she got that letter.”

Seron’s arms fell back down as he listened obediently to Jenny.

“So just tell it to her straight, like you told us now,” Jenny concluded.

“Exactly!” Natalia agreed. “Megmica only said she doesn’t like people who can’t confess in person. Nothing about hating you, Seron Maxwell. You’re clever enough to know the difference.”

“Indeed.” Nick nodded. “You need only be as clear and concise with her as you were with us.”

“I have to agree, Seron,” Larry finally said, “You remember what happened before? If you don’t say anything, you won’t get anything done.”

Seron slowly looked around at his four friends. Then—

“I-I understand.”

“Understand what? Say it,” Natalia urged.

“Do tell us,” Nick said with a nod.

“President’s orders,” Jenny commanded.

“All right! There’s nothing left to hide, buddy!” Larry said with an encouraging look.

Seron clenched his right fist and raised his voice slightly more than before.

“I’m not going to worry you guys anymore! Tomorrow, I’ll find Megmica and tell her the truth! Even if she doesn’t come to the office, I’m sure I’ll be able to locate her somewhere on campus. I’ll find her, apologize for being such an idiot, and...and I’ll tell her the truth. I’m going to ask her out!”

“Atta boy, Seron!”

“We are the witnesses to your determination!”

“You got this, Seron!”

“Go! You can do this!”

Blushing, Seron rose from his seat.

“Yeah! I’m gonna do this! I swear it!”

Seron let the round of applause wash over him as he tensed. He was on a roll.

“Tomorrow, I’ll do it! I know I can do this!”

“Great. So it’ll all be solved by tomorrow,” Natalia said, popping a piece of chocolate into her mouth.

“The solution was closer at hand than we had expected,” Nick agreed, smiling.

“Good luck, Seron. You have to be forward about confessing or it won’t work,” Jenny added, speaking from her own experiences.

“I know you can do it, buddy. Tomorrow after school, we’re gonna throw you a big party!” Larry’s fists punched the air.

* * *

<A-and then! And then what happened, SC Jenny?>

<The next day...the Capital District was hit by a massive cold snap, forcing the school to close.>

<...>

<Newbie? You still there?>

<Wh-what does that mean?>

<We had the worst snowfall in 83 years. It kept snowing for days on end without melting—it just piled up and up until roads were paralyzed and trams stopped operating. Only the dormitory students could possibly go to class. So including the weekend, we had six straight days without school.>

<Then what about SC Seron? He worked up all that courage to confess—>

<If Megmica couldn’t come to school, he obviously couldn’t find her at school.>

<...What about his determination...?>

<Six days without going to school. We got him caught up in the heat of the moment and built up all this momentum for the guy. But six days is more than enough to destroy all of that.>

<So...SC Seron didn’t manage to ask her out after all?>

<Nope. Even the gods abandoned him. Afterwards, none of us tried to spur him on again. We couldn’t. So Seron just ended up being wishy-washy and started avoiding her again.>

<Oh no...this is all my fault.>

<I’m the one who came up with this plan. Don’t beat yourself up over it, newbie.>

<B-but—>

<And I'm not even close to being finished here. Maybe about halfway?>

<I'm almost afraid to hear the rest of it.>

<But you have to listen to the end. The end of the story of Meg and Seron.>

<Could I take a quick bathroom break?>

Chapter 4: The Witness

<How should I explain... I guess I'll start with the craziness that happened once school opened again. The 4th of the second month.>

<What do you mean by 'craziness'?>

<It finally stopped snowing, but that didn't automatically mean the school was operating normally again.>

<I see. What were things like?>

<The snow was piled higher than a grown man was tall. So the school only managed to clear away the major pathways, like the one from the gates to the class buildings. And from the dorms to the gates.>

<That makes sense. Otherwise no one would be able to get into the buildings.>

<In other words, everywhere else was still covered in snow. The snow they cleared was piled on the grounds like mountains, making gym class and sports club activities impossible. Naturally everyone was clamoring to use the gymnasiums instead. It was unsightly to watch, but fights broke out all the time.>

<But you have three gymnasiums...>

<Anyway, I hear some of the classes went outside for snowball fights instead. But a lot of other pathways were closed off because of icicles and snow falling from the rooftops. Everyone was forced to use whatever routes had been cleared. So our morning and after-school rush hours became even more chaotic.>

<Wow...that's a recipe for mass tardiness.>

<Yep. Lots of people came in late on the first day back. And because everyone had to travel between classes through the buildings, the buildings were packed too. I felt bad watching the poor first-years. And...>

<There's more?>

<Uh-huh. Distribution was paralyzed because of the storm and there was a shortage of fresh food. So the cafeteria had to cut down on the menu. Everyone was complaining.>

<Funny. We had too much vegetables this year in Raputoa. The harvest was so good we had to deal with low prices.>

<The cafeteria crisis led to something interesting happening, though. After the mess, someone suggested storing non-perishable food in the cafeteria as a contingency. So they—along with other schools and companies—tried out an experimental program.>

<Hm...oh! You mean they bought products from SC Seron's company?>

<Bingo. They purchased chicken sauté and hamburgers from Maxwell Frozen Foods in bulk. They're better than what you'd normally expect from frozen food, so everyone likes 'em. I bet the company made a tidy profit from all this too.>

<That's great! For his family, I mean—but what about SC Seron?>

<Yeah, I'll get back to that in a second. The biggest source of confusion at school was the messed-up curriculum. How would they make up for all the classes we missed over those snow days?>

<It must have been tough with so many students.>

<We had a couple of extra classes every day in the afternoon, but you know how everyone has their own schedule here? Obviously people had overlapping makeup classes. It was hard enough for us, but the first-years had it really rough. They were totally lost.>

<I can imagine. That must have kept SC Seron occupied, too.>

<RA work kept him so busy he couldn't even come out to club for a while. There was less time to work with anyway so we didn't get much done, though. But that was when the newspaper club received a request.>

<Like those letters you got in your locker?>

<Yep. Let me go back to a few days before the request.>

* * *

The 7th day of the second month.

The student cafeteria at the 4th Capital Secondary School was empty.

Most of the students had finished lunch, leaving the tables mostly deserted. Middle-aged cafeteria ladies were wiping the tables and refilling napkins and condiment bottles.

Because the cafeteria was connected to the central gardens, students could eat outside when it was not raining. But in spite of the clouds and weak wind, it was very cold outside and the garden still served as a dumping ground for snow.

Nine snowmen stood in a row, built by students as though in competition. Some said that it made for an eerie sight in the evenings.

At one of the long cafeteria tables sat a girl with long brown hair and a girl with long black hair. All the tables around them were unoccupied.

"So you asked when everyone was in the office, huh," said Lillia Schultz, the brunette. She was speaking quietly in Bezelese to make sure no one could eavesdrop.

"Yeah," Meg replied, downcast, "And Seron left the office. I was so glad that the newbie was just mistaken, but then the others said the letter might have been right."

"Hm..."

"I don't know what's what anymore."

"D-don't cry, Meg!"

"I know. But I want to. My stomach hurts..."

Half of Meg's clam chowder, bread, and salad were still left on the tray.

Lillia, who had finished her meal, looked up.

"Say, Meg."

"Yeah?"

"Try it again just one more time!"

Meg was silent.

"This time make sure no one else is around, so you can have a serious conversation together. I think that'll be for the best."

"Y-you think so?"

"I bet Seron wants to apologize, too! He might have been too shy in front of the rest of the club, but I betcha he's still sorry for making you worry."

“Really?”

“Yep! There’s no harm in asking, at least. Communication is key.”

“Right...”

“You can’t ask in front of other people, so don’t talk to him about it at the office. Maybe when you run into him on campus instead.”

“Yeah...”

“And this time, make sure it’s just the two of you! That’s the important part. None of us want you to worry yourself sick over this, Meg. You have to eat right.”

“All right. Sorry for worrying you, Lillia.”

“Not at all! I’m worried because I’m your friend. Just make sure to catch him somewhere and have a long talk with him. You’ll feel a lot better no matter what answer he gives you!” Lillia nodded. Meg’s expression softened.

“Yeah... I’ll do that.”

“Do your best!”

“Thanks for listening to me, Lillia.”

“No problem!”

“I’m going ahead, then,” Meg finally said, getting up to go to her next class—which was further away than Lillia’s.

“See you!”

Lillia’s classroom was very close to the cafeteria. She waved Meg goodbye, but immediately afterwards, she wrapped her hands around her head.

“Is this my fault? Oh shoot...I hope Seron’s not angry. And I hope I haven’t messed things up for them. What to do...”

* * *

That evening, a thick layer of snow was still upon the grounds.

“Hah...hah...hah...”

Seron was running.

More accurately, he was slowly wading through the snow.

The snow remaining on the grounds had hardened with weight, and dozens of centimeters of fresher snow had been piled up on top of that.

Seron kicked away the snow and sometimes tripped with sweat on his brow as he moved forward.

He was wearing his school-issue tracksuit with a cardigan underneath, and a pair of rubber boots. He was dressed a little lightly for below-freezing weather, but did not seem to be cold.

Larry followed several meters behind him.

“I suggested a light jogging routine, not a march through the snow...” he sighed.

Larry was wearing a coat and had his backpack slung behind him. On his feet were boots with wooden snowshoes, which allowed him to slowly walk on top of the snow without sinking.

From higher ground Larry looked down at Seron’s back.

“No one’s watching, buddy. You don’t have to push yourself so hard.”

“No...I want to run at least one lap...haven’t run at all for days...”

“Sometimes you’re a little too hardworking, Seron,” Larry sighed, but he did a lap around the field with him anyway.

By the time they had made it back to the gates, Seron’s lower body was covered in snow and his tracksuit was drenched. Because he had fallen several times, snow also clung to his upper body and hair.

Sweat dripping from his face, Seron finished the last few meters of his run.

“Good work,” Larry said, taking off his snowshoes, “You better get inside and take a bath, Seron. If the sun goes down on you, you might freeze to death.”

“Right...” Seron replied between gasps, “Hah...hah...”

“I’m glad to see you’re improving.”

“Thanks...”

“Why’re you thanking me? You’re the one doing all the work here, buddy! You gotta have confidence. You’re a strong guy.”

“You think...I can deflect bullets at this rate...?”

“That might be tough. Blades are no good either, so avoid them if you ever get into trouble.”

“I won’t mind if it’s Megmica doing the stabbing.”

“Please stop trying to summon the grim reaper, Seron.”

Seron and Larry walked down the cleared path to the dorms.

Though Larry could simply walk out the gates and go home, he walked Seron all the way back.

The sun would set soon. No one else was visible on campus.

“Look, Seron,” Larry began, looking at Seron’s profiled face, “Try not to let anyone know who you have a crush on. And don’t let people know that you do like someone. It’ll be a headache if people find out.”

Seron nodded. “Yeah, I will. But what if someone asks?”

“Then maybe you should lie and say you don’t like anyone?”

“I’m not a good liar, but I’ll try.”

They parted ways at the dormitory entrance with a wave.

* * *

The 8th day of the second month.

It had been five days since classes resumed. The weekend was coming up, but Seron was as busy as ever helping out the first-years.

Before dawn, he was woken up to the news that a student was sick and throwing up. He took the boy to the dormitory office, where his condition worsened. So he called an ambulance and went to the ill student’s room to get some changes of clothes. Then he contacted the boy’s parents and explained the situation to the student’s floormates. It was a hectic morning.

Morning classes began without giving him the time for a relaxed breakfast.

Seron spotted a dormitory student who had gotten lost on campus—in spite of it have been a month since the term began—and guided him to class, ending up tardy for his own lesson.

And though it was not his job, at break time he took a girl to the nurse's office after she slipped on the snow and sprained her hand. Countless other girls sent jealous gazes in their direction, but Seron did not so much as blink.

After morning classes, Seron finally got to eat at the cafeteria. The menu was one of his mother's company's frozen burgers.

"They taste better when you defrost them for longer and cook them slowly on a grill...but I guess they wouldn't have that kind of time at the cafeteria," he remarked to himself.

That was when a first-year dropped his tray with a resounding clang, and almost burst into tears. Seron went over to help him out.

After afternoon classes and two makeup classes, he carried a towering stack of reports to the science office with a teacher and handed them in. Only then was Seron free.

The Whitfield watch on his wrist told him it was four in the afternoon.

The white clouds that had covered the sun all day had gone grey. It was snowing hard enough to make the world go white.

Three seconds of contemplation later, Seron turned not towards the newspaper club but the dorms.

From the fourth floor of the new building, he headed for the central staircase.

The new building was a five-story structure that had been erected most recently, renovated for a more modern design about 10 years ago.

The central staircase in the middle of the building was surrounded by large glass windows that offered fantastic views of the grounds.

With quick steps Seron strode down the dim, deserted halls.

When he reached the central staircase, he began to descend—

"Hmm..."

When he spotted a girl at the landing between the third and second floor.

She was sitting at a low stair by the window with her legs outstretched.

Her legs clad in black pantyhose were in full view, but she did not seem flustered in the least at the sight of Seron.

The girl was elegant in bearing with long, wavy golden hair. Her countenance was both lovely and sharp.

She was clearly older than Seron, most likely a sixth-year student. Scattered haphazardly next to her was her school bag and an expensive-looking fur coat.

Her light blue eyes met Seron's grey.

"Hey, are you busy?"

A clear soprano voice stopped Seron.

He descended the stairs and stopped at the landing, meeting the gaze of the smiling girl.

"No."

"Good. Could you help me find something?"

Seron accepted yet another request in his busy day.

"Of course. What is it you're looking for?"

The girl swept back her long golden hair and exposed her right ear. A small, red object glinted there.

"I lost my other earring."

Seron looked at the striking red earring and the smooth white neck below, and replied, "School regulations prohibit the wearing of accessories for non-religious reasons."

The girl stared for a moment, but a smile soon rose to her face.

"You're sounding like a regular RA."

"Because I am one."

"Interesting. What's your name?"

"Seron Maxwell. I'm a fourth-year."

"Maxwell, as in the red frozen food?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Wow! I've been at this school for more than five years, but I don't think I've met you before. It's nice to meet you, Maxwell. I'm Bridget. Bridget Armitage. Aren't you curious at all about what my family does?"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, SC Bridget. Did you drop the earring somewhere around here?" Seron asked indifferently.

Bridget's eyes widened again.

"Cool as a cucumber. But that doesn't make for interesting conversation, does it? My family owns Armitage Dresses. We have a big store by the thoroughfare in the north. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"You don't have to be so cold. We're famous for our wedding dresses, so don't hesitate to come to us if you ever decide to buy someone a gift. I can give you some extra favors. Right now I'm the vice-president of the sewing club."

"I see."

"And now I'm totally helpless because I lost an earring I'm not supposed to be wearing on campus."

"I'll help you look. Where did you drop it? It would be unfortunate if I were to accidentally step on it."

"Never mind."

"Pardon me?"

"Never mind. I just realized I don't even know for sure if I dropped it here. I probably didn't. I suppose I was a little out of sorts and ended up asking you to help for no real reason. But thanks anyway."

"I haven't done anything deserving thanks."

"You're such a good boy."

Bridget slowly rose and approached Seron. She was tall for a girl, almost the same height as him. She drew so near that her breath reached his face.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Maxwell?" she asked out of the blue. Seron replied mechanically, meeting her gaze.

"No."

"Then what about a crush?"

This time, he could not answer immediately. But Seron recalled his conversation with Larry the other day and managed a response.

“No.”

“Really?”

A moment later, Bridget did three things.

She brushed back her hair with her right hand, leaned slightly to the left, and slid closer to Seron.

Then she closed her eyes and kissed him softly on the lips.

Seron stared blankly as Bridget’s face drew near. Their lips met, and parted. He waited for her next course of action.

“You’re not acting as surprised as I thought you would,” Bridget commented, letting her hair down again. “That wasn’t your first kiss, was it?”

“I suppose not, no.”

“Now you’re making me jealous.”

“My mother and sister kiss me out of the blue all the time at home.”

“Aww, that doesn’t count. It must be nice to have such a loving family, but this isn’t one of *those* kisses. Didn’t you feel at least a little excited, Maxwell?”



Seron's face changed ever so slightly.

A dark shadow came over his grey eyes. And he responded in a plain voice.

"No. I don't think I'll feel even a little excited kissing someone I'm not in love with."

"That's cruel of you. But all right. That was just a little show of gratitude. I can give you all the kisses you want whenever you feel like it. I hope you'll get to kiss someone you love someday. And—"

"And?"

"It's not nice to lie about your crush, little boy."

"..."

"Well, see you around, Maxwell."

With her long golden hair aflutter, Bridget turned and picked up her things. Then she gave Seron one last look and a wink, and danced down the stairs.

Seron did not follow. He waited until her footsteps disappeared from the central staircase.

Then he looked out the window.

"I keep meeting the strangest women this year..." he mumbled in a detached voice.

The snowfall had become a storm.

With snow piling up on her umbrella, Bridget headed to the roundabout outside the gates.

Her bodyguard quickly got out of her luxury car and opened the door.

Bridget handed him her coat and got into the back seat, tossing her bag next to her.

Then her slender fingers reached into the breast pocket of her jacket and pulled out a small case. She took out the red earring inside and put it on her left ear with a practiced hand.

"All right. Let's go," she ordered the driver.

The security guard on the snowy grounds watched the car carrying Bridget disappear from the roundabout and spotted another luxury car pull in.

He recognized the model, license plate, and the bodyguard-slash-driver inside. So he did not go over to identify the car. Because so many students commuted by car, security guards found themselves developing excellent memorization skills.

Soon, a girl ran out the gates and into the car. Though she was wearing a coat and carrying an umbrella, what stuck out most to the guard were the pigtails fluttering behind her.

But he could not see the look of anger and the tears on her face.

"Is something the matter, Miss Megmica?" the driver asked, opening the door.

"No, it is nothing!" she replied as though in a sob, but her voice was absorbed by the fallen snow and never reached the guard.

* * *

<Hello. Strauski Residence.>

<Hey there, Johan. You sound like you're doing well.>

<Oh, it's Big Sis Lillianne Aikashia Corazon Whittington Schultz. It's been a while!>

<It sure has! And your Roxchean's gotten better, too.>

<It's not as good as your Bezelese, Big Sis Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz!>

<C'mon, just call me Lillia.>

<But your full name's so cool! My whole family thinks it's cool! You're like a Western hero with that super-traditional name!>

<Haha! Is Meg home?>

<Yeah, but she's sleeping.>

<It's kind of early for bed. Did something happen?>

<Yeah. She says she's got a stomachache.>

<Poor thing. Maybe it's the cold weather.>

<Nah, she just ate too much. It's not a cold.>

<What? Meg overate?>

<Uh-huh. Between you and me, I think she's really angry right now. Mom and Dad aren't home so the housekeeper cooked for us, and since no one could scold her she just ate and ate and ate until she got sick.>

<Are you sure this is Meg you're talking about? It's not good to starve, but overeating's almost as bad. I wonder what happened.>

<Dunno. But Big Bro Kurt might know! I'll give him the phone!>

<Thanks, Johan.>

<Yes, this is Kurt!>

<Hey Kurt! It's Lillia.>

<Oh! It's Big Sis Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz! Hiya.>

<Enough with the full name...anyway, Johan told me that Meg has a stomachache. What happened?>

<Er...I dunno.>

<He says she overate. Did she really?>

<Yeah. She did. But...oh! I think I might know why!>

<Why?>

<Well, maybe she's worried about something? She might have a lot of stuff on her mind! Secrets!>

<I-I think you might be right. I suppose I shouldn't pry.>

<Anyway, she just overate so she'll be okay by tomorrow. And she said that her worries are gone so she can do her best at the newspaper club next week.>

<Th-that's good to hear. I was just calling to check up on her, so you don't need to tell her I called. Okay?>

<Okay!>

<Bye, Kurt!>

<Bye, Hero of the West!>

The Hero of the West put down the receiver.

"Hmm...hmm...hmm..."

Arms crossed, she paced around her living room.

“So this time she ate too much. Is it because of Seron? Did they talk to each other? Hmm...”

She paced back and forth again and again, muttering to herself.

“I’m home, Lillia! Oh? What are you doing?” her mother wondered, stepping into the living room decked out in full Air Force officer uniform.

* * *

The 11th day of the second month.

As the week started, things finally began returning to normal.

The cold snap was gone, and so was the unusually heavy snowfall. The heat from the ground slowly began to melt the snow from the bottom up, reducing its volume little by little. The snowmen in the central gardens began to crumble as well.

The school curriculum was altered with makeup classes taken into consideration. Classes were assigned to avoid giving students too much stress, teachers did what they could to compress the syllabus, and students (to their chagrin) received large amounts of extra homework.

It was 3 in the afternoon. Classes were over and the sky was cloudy.

“Tea’s ready!” Larry called, hard at work as usual.

“Thanks. Take a look at this, guys! I got these cookies at the department store the other day. It’s all for me, but I set a little aside for you too!” Natalia bragged, having recently begun to bring her own cookies to school to eat with her tea.

“Thank you. I can always trust your taste in food, Nat,” Nicholas said with his ever-mysterious smile.

“I’m starting to think that we’re actually the after-school tea club,” Jenny grumbled, though she reached for one of Natalia’s scrumptious cookies.

“I will decline today. Overeating is not good,” Meg said, limiting herself to tea.

“Been a while since you dropped in, Megmica. How are you?”

“I am well, thank you. It seemed that I should sometimes show my face to this side as well,” Meg replied brightly.

Natalia downed several cookies before pointedly changing the subject.

“So Larry, how’s Seron doing?” she asked, glancing at Meg, but Meg did not react. “Doesn’t really matter, but still.”

“Then don’t ask. He’ll be busy with RA stuff for the beginning of the week at least,” Larry replied, repeating what Seron had said in the office before.

And no one else brought up Seron after that. There was a silent agreement between the club members to not interfere, because Seron had declared that he would confess to Meg personally.

Jenny changed the subject.

“All the snow and weekends and makeup classes are really putting a damper on club activities, huh,” she said, munching on a cookie.

“Don’t be that way, chief. Cookies and tea aren’t too bad.”

Jenny sighed and reached for a second cookie.

“More importantly, we have nothing about which to write a news article,” Nick pointed out. Jenny had to agree.

“What about all the requests you got, Jenfie?” asked Larry.

“Yes, there may be useful requests among those requests,” Meg agreed.

“Haven’t gotten much since things started getting hectic,” Jenny said, “And none of them were interesting.”

“Too bad, chief. We’ll easily survive on these cookies for now, though. I can bring even better ones next time,” Natalia guaranteed.

“What are you planning to do to this club, Nat?” asked Nick.

“Make it into a snack club.”

“You could have at least pretended to think about it, Lia,” Larry sighed, when there was a knock.

“Someone’s here.”

Jenny, who sat nearest the door, got up to personally greet the guest.

Behind the door stood a tall male student.

He was clearly a senior-classman. The boy had short brown hair and a sturdy build. Not only that, he was handsome enough to be a film star.

“Good afternoon. I’m here with a request for the newspaper club. May I?”

“Of course, come right in.”

Jenny let the guest into the warm office.

The student looked at the club members sitting around the coffee table.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” he said, his pearly-white teeth glinting. Jenny led him to the single seat. Larry got up to prepare him a cup of tea.

“I’m impressed. Your office is incredible,” said the boy. He then turned to Jenny. “So you’re Jones, the president. My name is Kenneth. Kenneth Einsworth. I’m a sixth-year.”

“It’s nice to meet you, SC Kenneth. Let me introduce you to the members. This is Natalia Steinbeck the eating machine, whose real body is her glasses. Strauski Megmica the Westerner. Nicholas Browning, who is pretending to be a boy but is actually a boy. And Larry Hepburn, professional tea-brewer.”

Everyone greeted Kenneth in their own way.

“Ah, so you’re SC Cato’s brother?” asked Kenneth. “I owe him a lot from marksmanship classes a few years ago. You look just like him.”

“You’re a friend of Cato, SC Kenneth? Cool.”

Larry handed Kenneth a cup of tea and a small plate of cookies. Even Natalia’s usual “Hey, that’s mine!” was nowhere to be heard.

Kenneth took a sip and remarked on the flavor before moving on to the topic at hand.

“I’ve read your two newspapers. And rumors say that you’re taking on requests right now. Everyone is convinced that you guys are capable of conducting great investigations.”

“I suppose you could say that,” Jenny said.

A shadow came over Kenneth’s face.

“I have a request. I don’t know if you’ll accept, but I don’t have anyone else to turn to. I couldn’t write to you guys because my situation’s a bit complex, so I wanted to come ask in person.”

“We’re all ears, SC Kenneth. I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but right now we’re totally free,” said Jenny.

“All we do is drink tea every day,” Larry added.

Kenneth breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the club. Then—

“I know this is going to sound very stupid. So please don’t tell anyone about my request.”

He waited for everyone to nod and continued.

“I have a fiancée. It’s sort of synonymous with ‘intended’ these days, but in my case she’s not *my* intended. It’s an arranged marriage that my parents and her parents have been planning since before we were even born.”

The club members nodded.

“Her parents and my parents are such close friends that they promised that if one couple had a son and the other couple a daughter, they would have the two kids marry. It was a very early promise to be making, but it’s still valid now 18 years later. My betrothed and I grew up together and now we’re both attending this school. We’ll probably be married by this time next year.”

“That’s romantic,” Natalia remarked. Meg’s expression darkened.

So did Kenneth’s.

Steepling his fingers, Kenneth leaned forward and lowered his voice.

“My fiancée is cheating on me.”

As the newspaper members reeled in shock, Kenneth continued to explain.

His fiancée was a fellow student at the 4th Capital Secondary School, who was seeing many male students on campus.

She would approach the boy first and entice him, only to abandon him not long afterwards.

Her targets were always handsome younger boys. She would enjoy trysts with them in deserted places on campus where people could not see.

Though she had hidden her tracks well, Kenneth had begun to hear rumors around the middle of the previous year.

He had not wanted to believe the rumors at first, but the more he investigated the more the rumors seemed to be true.

Which meant that he needed decisive evidence of her infidelity—specifically, photographs.

“That’s about it. Do you have any questions?” Kenneth asked, tipping tea into his dry mouth.

“Do your parents know about this, SC Kenneth?” asked Jenny.

“Not yet. My parents—and her parents too—are more enthusiastic about this marriage than we are. It’s practically their life goal. They’re not just waiting with bated breath for next

year—they're already planning the ceremony. We're both only children, so it's even worse. I can't just go telling my parents without concrete evidence to back me up."

"I see," Jenny said with a nod. Nick spoke next.

"Excuse me, SC Kenneth, but does your family happen to run Austin & Amavisca, the renowned jewelers from the Republic of Daurade?"

"I'm amazed," Kenneth said, eyes widening, "How did you know?"

"I read a business magazine earlier this year that featured interviews with various people of prominence. One among them featured the Einsworth couple—your parents—who claimed that they would be focusing on wedding jewelry as their son would finish secondary school and marry his fiancée this year."

Kenneth shook his head, defeated. "My parents are really fired up about this. If I were to oppose, they'd make a brilliant cut out of me. Anyway, it's good to see that you guys are so well-informed. I'm glad I decided to ask the newspaper club."

Meg slowly raised her hand. Kenneth turned to her.

"Er...SC Kenneth, what will you do when you get the true evidence in your hand?"

"Excellent question," Kenneth said, and turned the question around. "Put yourself in my shoes. How would you react if you found out your betrothed was a philanderer?"

"I would get angry," Meg replied quietly. Even Kenneth was taken aback by the seething rage in her tone.

"R-right. That's how I feel. So I want to break off this engagement. It'll take time to convince my parents and I know it'll hurt my fiancée's parents too. But I want to live my own life."

"I understand. You cannot pledge your future with a person with a bad behavior."

"Right," Kenneth replied, looking a little sad. But he firmly nodded.

Jenny simply stared at Meg during the entirety of the exchange.

"SC Kenneth," said Natalia, "have you ever seen her cheat in person? What if it's just a rumor?"

"I wish."

"So you *have* seen her?"

"Yeah. Unlike when we were little, we're not together all the time anymore—our classes are all different too—but once I heard the rumors, I tailed her. I know it's stupid. But I did. And I saw her meet with other guys in deserted places, kissing them quickly. I don't even want to imagine the rest."

The club members sighed. Kenneth continued.

"People kissing in hallways isn't uncommon at school, but it's still painful to have to watch your own fiancée kissing someone else. I saw her do it again just a few days ago, on the 8th, I think. She went up to a guy at a landing on the central staircase and kissed him on the lips. I saw it all from the grounds. It was nauseating."

The club members each voiced their sympathies to Kenneth, but one person took a deep breath.

"Excuse me!" Meg cried, raising a hand violently into the air. Everyone turned in shock. Meg had the face of a puppy about to bite an intruder.

"Please tell us. Tell us the name of your fiancée."



“Right. Of course. Her name is—”

Kenneth took out a photograph from his breast pocket and placed it on the table.

The photo featured Kenneth and a beautiful girl with golden hair and red earrings. Both were in uniform, but looked a little younger. Neither were smiling.

“—Bridget Armitage.”

Chapter 5: The Request

“Jenny! And everyone. We should do this! We must!” Meg cried. The others looked up in shock.

“Do what?” Jenny asked on everyone’s behalf.

“This request! We will solve SC Kenneth’s sadness! We will get the evidence in our hands and help! We can do it! Our role is to light the truth!” Meg pontificated.

“Looks like something’s flipped a switch,” Natalia remarked quietly.

“SC Kenneth is very sad! It is horrible! If we can make someone happy, we must! The fiancée was too cruel!” Meg continued, as though she were the one who had been personally offended.

Jenny fell into thought for a moment, arms crossed.

Finally—

“I have a few conditions before we accept this request, SC Kenneth.”

“Of course.”

“First, we’ll do our best but can’t guarantee any results. It’ll get difficult for us if your fiancée notices something is wrong. And I’d like to set a deadline—can’t have the club chasing after the target all year.”

“Right. What do you say to the end of this month, then?”

“Hm?” Larry tilted his head, but he did not say anything.

“All right,” Jenny replied, “We’ll tail her for the next 20 days or so and do our best to get you that photograph.”

“You can always trust Jenny to take photos in secret,” Natalia said.

“Thanks,” Kenneth replied, “And one more thing—I’d like you to give me any and all photos you take of the scene. And if Bridget happens to catch you, don’t go out of your way to feign ignorance. Feel free to tell her that I’ve requested your help in catching her in the act. I’m ready and willing to dirty my own hands.”

“Please don’t worry! We are very good!” Meg assured him.

* * *

Kenneth left the office, leaving behind the photograph, a copy of Bridget’s schedule, and his contact information.

“Talk about a sad request,” Natalia remarked, munching on a cookie. No one else was still eating. It was getting dark outside.

“But I think this is a meaningful request! That marriage is unforgivable! We must do our best efforts and help him! Because we can do it!” Meg cried, still indignant.

“Well,” said Jenny, “considering what we did for SC Sophia and the Stella case, this request isn’t too far from our usual. And like our motto says, ‘assist all romantic endeavors’.”

“That takes me back!” Larry exclaimed from the kitchenette.

“To when?” Natalia asked.

“Don’t you remember? It was when SC Sophia came to us with her request last summer.”

“Ah, after we ate bacon and lettuce club sandwiches. I remember now. That bacon was the perfect balance of meat and grease.”

“Does your stomach double as your brain, Lia?”

Jenny turned away from the conversation and to Nick. “The Einsworth family’s supposed to be pretty rich, right?”

“Yes, though not as much as the Jones family.”

“So his fiancée’s family must be about the same, too...”

Jenny trailed off. Nick nodded.

“You’ve heard of her?” she asked.

“I cannot say for certain, but I suspect her family may run Armitage Dresses, located by the thoroughfare in the north. It’s one of the Capital District’s top clothing brands,” Nick explained without missing a beat.

“I see. So it’s an engagement between two rich families. Then it’ll be hard to break them up without someone losing face. I dunno if a few photographs are gonna work here—I mean, when it comes down to it the parents could just crumple them up and pretend they never existed,” Jenny posited. Nick smiled.

“It all seems so very realistic when you put it that way, Jenny. Almost as if you have first-hand experience.”

“Shut up.”

“Then does it mean that this marriage cannot be broken?” asked Meg. “For example, even if we have the evidence?”

“Unfortunately, there’s a very good chance of that.” Jenny nodded. Meg exploded again.

“It is horrible! Two people who do not love each other marrying will not be well! What is life for? Are they slaves of their parents? What age is today?”

“There, there, Megmica. Calm down. We all agree with you there. Want a cookie?” Natalia asked, pacifying Meg. Meg put a cookie into her mouth and munched on it before swallowing.

“I cannot forgive a cheater! I will break this engagement, I promise!”

* * *

<So that’s what happened.>

<A fiancée at his school...>

<Being in an arranged marriage isn’t that uncommon at our school, you know. But people in their situation are usually happy about it. They act all clingy on campus, showing off to everyone about how they’re going to get married in the future.>

<It’s like a different world from school here in Raputoa.>

<Anyway...>

<So I suppose this request somehow led to something big happening with SC Megmica and SC Seron.>

<You’re half right.>

<What about the other half?>

<Another one.>

<What?>

<It was another request. SC Kenneth wasn't the only one who came to us for help.>

<What? What happened?>

<Something crazy. It was the next day...>

* * *

The 12th day of the second month.

For once, it was bright and sunny. Once again Larry was the first to reach the office.

The snow left over outside shone brilliantly under the sun. It was so bright that he did not need to turn on any of the lights in the office.

He took a seat on the sofa and began fiddling with a camera. It was the rangefinder Jenny had taught the others to use at Ercho Village, equipped with a 50mm lens.

Larry put the camera in its bag and stood, holding the bag in his left hand.

“...There!”

He quickly pulled the camera from the bag, pointed it at the kettle in the kitchenette and pressed the shutter, then stuffed it back into the bag. He was practicing to catch Bridget in the act.

Several more tries later, Larry groaned.

“This is harder than I expected. How does Jenny do it?”

“Hey Larry. Are you practicing a new dance?” Seron asked, walking through the door.

“Hey Seron! Er...I'm trying to practice pulling out the camera for a quick snapshot. It's not working as well as I'd hoped,” Larry replied, quickly turning to Seron and pressing the shutter.

Seron gave him a curious look.

“Don't worry, it's not loaded. It's the same with guns—you gotta practice with an empty one before you move on to live ammo. Sit down and I'll get you some tea.”

Seron did as Larry instructed. Larry busied himself in the kitchenette.

“Did the others tell you about yesterday's request, by any chance?”

“No. What was it?”

“This sixth-year named Kenneth Einsworth wants us to get evidence that his fiancée is cheating on him. Wants to break out of an arranged marriage, he says. Apparently the girl's, er... loose with men. Kissing boys who catch her eye in the halls and stuff. SC Kenneth says he's seen her in the act a few times.”

“...Larry?”

“What's with the scary face, Seron?”

“Did he tell you her name?”

“Uh-huh. Bridget Armitage. She looked real beautiful in the photo he showed us.”

Seron was silent.

“Seron? Everything all right?”

“Yeah. I'm fine. So did Jenny accept?”

“Yeah. Club motto and stuff, you know. So we’re going to catch her in the act and get some photographs. Deadline’s till the end of the month,” Larry said, returning to the table with the teapot and Seron’s cup. “Here.”

“Thanks. So that’s why you were practicing, huh.”

“I’ve still got a long way to go, though. Maybe it’ll be easier to rig the camera bag instead. Cut a hole in it and hide the release cable in my hand and—”

“Say, Larry. About SC Kenneth…” Seron said, cutting Larry off in an unusual show of assertiveness.

“Yeah?”

“He lives in the dorms.”

“Cool.” Larry nodded.

“So he didn’t tell you, did he?” Seron asked stiffly.

“…No.”

It was Larry’s turn to hesitate. Seron continued.

“That’s not all. Until last year, he’d been an RA for two years in a row. I thought he’d keep going this year, but he turned down the job.”

“Huh. Don’t people usually keep at it though, after two years?”

“Yeah. And sixth-years get some leeway in their work too because they have to prepare for university entrance exams. But if he quit anyway, it must mean he’s got something weighing on his mind.”

“I see. Ever talk to him in person, Seron?”

“No, we’ve always been on different floors. I’ve seen him give speeches at the dormitory meetings and I’m sure we’ve passed each other by before. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knows who I am.”

“Obviously, since you’re an RA now.”

“And I’ve heard a lot of rumors about SC Kenneth from the other senior-classmen.”

“Yeah?”

“Apparently he’s very understanding and smart.”

“Oh.”

“And one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“He takes photos as a hobby, and they say he’s pretty good. He even develops his own photographs at home. He might get along with Jenny.”

“Interesting. He didn’t say anything about that yesterday, though.”

Seron said nothing.

“Seron? You zoning out again?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

That was when they were interrupted.

“Hey guys! I brought more snacks!”

“It seems I am fourth today. It has been a long time, Seron.”

“Hey guys. Glad you could make it, Seron. Dunno if I’d call it good timing, though.”

The others arrived one after another. But Meg was not among them. When Jenny explained that she was at the chorus club, Seron fell blankly into thought.

“Here we go!” Natalia cried, taking out a paper bag full of rusks. “Eat up,” she offered, and stuffed several into her mouth. “Hey Seron, did Larry tell you ‘bout yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what about how Megmica reacted? ‘I cannot forgive a cheater!’ She’s really fired up.”

“...I suppose that’s a good attitude to have for the investigation.”

“Still as cool as ever. Here—the place I get it from has good bread, but nothing beats their maple syrup rusk. Garlic ain’t bad either but at snack time you can’t go wrong with maple. You know?”

Seron, who had not yet had dinner, picked up a rusk and put it into his mouth when someone knocked on the door.

“Coming,” Jenny said, getting up and turning the doorknob.

And she was stunned into silence.

“Good afternoon. Oh, nice office.”

The girl walking through the door was familiar to all the members. And in Seron’s case, he had met her in person.

Bridget Armitage elegantly strode inside, her golden hair aflutter. She took a seat where her fiancé had sat the previous day.

Everyone but the blank-faced Seron was visibly shocked. Bridget put on a bewitching smile.

“Hey, what’s with all the glancing? Is there something on my face?”

“N-no, it’s nothing. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Jenny Jones, the president of the newspaper club.”

Like the previous day, Jenny introduced the club members. But this time she omitted the strange descriptions.

Bridget cast Seron a meaningful look when Jenny introduced him, but no one paid it any particular notice.

Then it was Bridget’s turn to introduce herself.

“It’s nice to meet you, everyone. I’m Bridget Armitage, a sixth-year.”

‘We all know, because your fiancé came in yesterday asking us to investigate your infidelity!’ everyone thought, but no one said a word.

“The newspaper club’s supposed to be the most reliable investigators in the school, so I decided to pay you a visit. Could you listen to what I have to say? You have to promise not to tell anyone, of course.”

Bridget was saying exactly what her fiancé had said the previous day.

“Sure. Go ahead,” said Jenny.

Larry served Bridget tea.

“Oh wow, what a fancy cup. I expected nothing less from the Jones heiress. And the tea smells lovely. Thank you,” Bridget said, beginning with comments completely unrelated to her request.

“Try these too,” Natalia offered, handing Bridget a small plate of rusks.

“Oh, wow! I love this bakery. They have the best rusks in the Capital District. And maple-flavored too. How lovely.”

“You have excellent taste.”

“Of course. I could say the same for you.”

“Aw, you’re makin’ me blush.”

The conversation was going nowhere. Jenny forced it back on track.

“Er...are you hoping to join the club? We’re always looking for new members.”

Bridget noticed the hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“Oh, sorry. I always get carried away when I see nice things. I hope we can have a nice, long chat someday once my problem’s been solved,” she said, the smile on her face never faltering.

‘We don’t even know if we’ll accept your case, let alone solve it,’ everyone thought, but no one said a word.

Bridget finally got to the point.

“I have a fiancé. He’s the same age as me and attends this school. His name is Kenneth Einsworth.”

Everyone knew that already. They nodded.

“My parents and his parents set up this marriage before we were even born. They want to hold the ceremony as soon as we graduate.”

Everyone knew that already, too. They nodded.

“He’s verbally abusing me.”

No one had known that.

“Hm?” “What?” “...?” “Huh?” “No way.”

Everyone gasped.

“He’s verbally abusing me. It’s terrible.”

Bridget repeated herself. There was no sadness in her eyes—she told her story with no emotion.

“On the outside he seems like a great guy. Handsome, friendly, and nice. But he flips out when we’re alone. Swearing at me. Calling me a useless bimbo. Saying he’s marrying me out of pity so I should do everything he tells me to do.”

The club members listened in silent as Bridget continued, her beautiful face frozen as though in a mask.

“He despises me. So of course he doesn’t want to marry me. He wants someone cuter. But he can’t break away from his parents or go against them because he loves himself too much. He’s not man enough to face himself. So he’s taking out all that stress on me, since I’m powerless to resist. I’m sick of him.”

Jenny slowly raised a hand.

“Could I ask you a few things, SC Bridget? You don’t have to answer if my questions make you uncomfortable, of course.”

“Sure.”

“When did this verbal abuse begin?”

“I don’t know. He’s always had a bit of that in him since we were kids. When we were alone, he’d try to act all cool, like he was the best guy in the world. It got worse once we started



secondary school together and got more chances to meet. But it didn't get really bad until around the middle of last year."

Natalia and Nick exchanged silent glances. Larry had been pouting for some time.

"I see. Thank you for answering. So what exactly do you want us to do?"

"Help me break off this engagement. Like I said, my parents are dead-set on having us marry, and it'll be nearly impossible to convince them. Same with his parents."

"Right."

"So I need irrefutable evidence of his abuse. Something that'll change my parents' minds. My testimony's not going to be enough, so I need someone else to back me up."

"So you're asking for a recording?"

"That would be the best, but recording devices are too big. I've already looked into it, to tell you the truth."

"I see. My father does have a tape recorder at home, but it'll take me some time to prepare to bring it to school. That's probably the only way, since you can't capture verbal abuse on camera."

"Your testimony will work too. You can even listen in on us if you'd like."

"I don't know if anyone would consider us credible witnesses, though."

"Oh? You know as well as I do that the Jones heiress is more influential than that."

Jenny fell silent. But Nick quickly took over.

"Has SC Kenneth ever resorted to physical violence, SC Bridget?"

"Not yet, thankfully. But that's not Kenneth being a gentleman. He knows he can't afford to leave any evidence of his abuse. And he always makes sure we're alone when he abuses me."

"Then I suppose a sound recording will be our best option. It will serve us better than simple eyewitness testimony."

"Can you do it?"

"We could bring the necessary machinery to the office and set up the microphone a distance away. What do you say, Jenny?" Nick asked, turning. Jenny thought for a moment before looking up.

"It's doable, but the microphone has to be within a few dozen meters of the office. For example, up to the oak tree behind the building."

"That sounds perfect. Then could I trust you to do this for me?"

"Of course. But it'll take at least two or three days for us to prepare. Maybe even longer."

"I've waited this long; I can certainly wait a few more days. That's all I have to say for today."

Jenny nodded. "If SC Kenneth abuses you again, make sure to note down the place and the content of his abuse somewhere."

"All right. That sounds like a good idea. And about contacting me—my parents might notice if you call my house, so let's exchange notes through lockers. Mine's number 6333, with a ribbon and my name tag on it."

"Of course. Please wait for us to contact you. My locker number is 4649."

"Thanks for everything, newspaper club. Let's fight hard together," Bridget said with a smile, nearly finishing her cup of tea. "This tea is really good. Who brewed it?"

"Oh, it was me."

“You’re really something,” Bridget said, winking.
A chill ran down Larry’s spine.

A minute passed after Bridget left the office.

Everyone had been silent—or stuffing themselves full of rusks—but Nick finally spoke.
“Curiouser and curiouser.”

“So lemme get this straight,” said Natalia, “We got an engaged couple. The guy wants us to see if the girl’s cheating on him, and the girl wants us to get proof the guy is abusing her. And they both want to rebel against their parents and break off the engagement.”

Larry stood and put away Bridget’s teacup. “One’s a cheater and the other’s an abuser. And they both want to get the upper hand on the other. That...*almost* sounds like a match made in heaven,” he sighed incredulously.

“So what shall we do, Jenny?” asked Nick.

“What would you suggest, then? What would you do in my shoes, Nick?” Jenny shot back.

“I would carry out both requests dutifully and find out the truth. Then I would judge which one of the two will serve best as an informant in the future and take their side,” Nick said, all with a smile on his face.

“You are evil.” Natalia shook her head. But then she grinned. “And smart! Let’s do it, chief!”

“So you’re for it?” Larry said snidely, returning to his seat.

“Can we really call this a *romantic* endeavor?” Jenny wondered, crossing her arms.
“Breaking up an arranged marriage... It’ll be hard to pull off.”

“Probably,” Natalia said with a nod. “If they could’ve broken up on their own, they would have already.”

“Hm?”

Seron looked up, quietly breaking his silence. Larry noticed the change but turned back to the conversation between Jenny and Natalia.

“You think maybe one of them is lying, chief?”

“It’s definitely a possibility,” said Jenny.

“Oh! That might be it!” Larry nodded.

“You gotta learn to be more suspicious, Larry,” Natalia quipped.

“Right, right. You might be nicer than you look sometimes, Lia.”

“Flattery won’t get you any rusks.”

“That was suspicion, not flattery.”

Jenny cut in. “We have three possibilities,” she said, writing down the scenarios on a notepad.

The first possibility:

Kenneth was lying to the club (in other words, Bridget was a faithful fiancée and a victim of his verbal abuse). Kenneth wanted to use her as a scapegoat to get out of the engagement.

The second possibility:

Bridget was lying to the club (in other words, Kenneth was a kindhearted fiancé tormented by her infidelity). Bridget wanted to use him as a scapegoat to get out of the engagement.

The third possibility:

Both were telling the truth (in other words, Bridget was cheating on Kenneth and Kenneth was verbally abusing Bridget). Both wanted to hide their own faults and use the other as a scapegoat to get out of the engagement.

“That’s nice and easy to understand. Thanks, chief.”

“So it must be one of these three possibilities. I would bet on the third option.”

“I see.”

Everyone nodded, but Seron alone remained still. “Nat, could I have a rusk?”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks. I’ve got a sudden craving for sweets.”

“Your brain’s revving up, eh?”

Seron munched on a rusk, sending sugar to his stomach and his brain.

Larry began to think. “SC Kenneth didn’t seem like he was lying yesterday, though.”

“But did SC Bridget look like she was?” Natalia shot back.

“No. She didn’t.”

“Guess we can’t just take either of ‘em at face value. And neither of ‘em said they were innocent. We might figure something out when we investigate. We’ll know who’s lying, or if they both are.”

“That does present us with a problem,” Nick pointed out. “If we wish to carry out SC Kenneth’s request, we will have to get near SC Bridget. But she knows our faces.”

“Yeah...” Natalia nodded, but she looked up. “Actually, no. You’re doing this on purpose, Nick. SC Bridget hasn’t seen Megmica yet.”

“Ah, it slipped my mind.”

“I see right through you, Nick.”

Jenny nodded. “So we’ll have to get Megmica to take the snapshots. I can support her with a telephoto lens from afar.”

“That does seem to be a reasonable plan. Megmica was very enthusiastic about SC Kenneth’s request. And though it pains me to have to suggest this, I propose that we keep the fact of SC Bridget’s request from Megmica.”

“Yeah...at least, until we figure out what’s going on,” Jenny said with a nod. “I’m the one who brought this up, so if Megmica gets angry later, just tell her I put you all under a gag order. Got it?”

“Aww chief, are you playing the bad guy again?” Natalia teased, elbowing Jenny, but Jenny ignored her. And she turned to the member of the club most suited to silence.

“What’s your take, Seron?”

“...”

“Seron?”

“Huh? Oh, er...it’s really good.”

“Not the rusk,” said Natalia, “Only animals have nothing but food on their minds all the time, Seron.”

“Sorry.”

“That was supposed to be a joke, buddy,” said Larry.

Seron looked around at the others with his blank grey eyes.

“I went through the possibilities in my head, but I just can’t figure out why they’re lying to us. So I agree we should carry out both requests.”

“Oh? So your basic assumption is that both are lying? I’m surprised, Seron,” Nick said, a little snidely but still smiling.

“Yeah. Wouldn’t be surprising from Nick, though,” Natalia agreed.

“There’s all kinds of people out there,” Seron simply replied.

Jenny nodded and wrapped up.

“Then we’ll prep for SC Bridget’s request while carrying out SC Kenneth’s request with Megmica at the head. But bringing a recording device from home won’t be as easy as getting some binoculars. I have to give a good excuse for using it, and I need a car and someone to carry it into the office. I can leave it to Kurtz and Litner, but—”

“I can help with the heavy lifting.”

“I’ll ask for help if we need any. Any questions?”

* * *

<No one had any questions, and that was all for the day’s meeting.>

<Hmm...it must have been confusing, getting requests from both sides to break up the engagement.>

<It was interesting in its own way. We had the chance to go out and seek the truth ourselves.>

<I don’t have the guts to do something like that.>

<Wish you were around to join us, newbie.>

<I-I wouldn’t dare! Anyway, how did this affect SC Megmica and SC Seron?>

<I’m getting to that. First, we assigned Megmica to tail Bridget Armitage.>

<Yes? And what did you find out?>

<Those rumors that SC Kenneth talked about...turned out to be completely true.>

Chapter 6: The Photograph

The 13th day of the second month.

It was after school on the day after Bridget's request.

"It is unbelievable! That person!" Meg fumed from the sofa.

Gathered around were, as usual, Natalia, Larry, Nick, and Jenny. Everyone except for Seron. Whether he had luckily—or unluckily—been kept busy or had run away was up for debate, but either way he would not come to the office that day.

Once again it was bright and clear outside. The sunlight reflected off the melting snow was as blinding as ever.

"I cannot believe it! That senior-classman is a very unfaithful person! I saw today, in person! I saw it with my own eyes!" Meg seethed, face red with rage. "It was around the end of the lunch period. Referring to the timetable that SC Kenneth taught, I hid like a detective at the hallway that SC Bridget passes. Then the person I saw on the photo appeared. She was with a different male student, not SC Kenneth. They were happily walking, like lovers. And—"

Her hands trembled.

"And before they separated and entered the classrooms, I was shocked because quickly SC Bridget kissed! I cannot believe it! Of course there were not many but some students, including me, in the hall. So other people will have seen! Of course many people kiss in school here. But SC Bridget has a different fiancé!"

Then she fell back into her seat like a toy drained of batteries.

"It is very very sad that I was not fast, so I could not take photos. If I had taken photos, I could ease SC Kenneth's wound..."

The others waited for a moment before offering their opinions. Natalia, holding a biscuit, was first.

"That was easy. So SC Bridget was exactly who SC Kenneth said she was."

"We may not have photographs," said Nick, "but Megmica's testimony is trustworthy and valuable information."

Larry was next. "But that's not gonna be enough to convince their parents. It's not gonna be a walk in the park."

"So possibility 1 is out," Jenny said. She took out her notepad. "I looked into SC Bridget too. Lemme go over everything."

All eyes were on Jenny.

"This is from a reliable informant, and well, it's basically the exact thing Megmica just said."

"So there's nothing but bad rumors about her, chief?"

"Pretty much. SC Bridget is popular with the boys thanks to her looks, but it's almost scary how much the girls hate her. Not a single girl had anything good to say about her. I quote, 'acts like a princess just because she's rich and pretty', 'flirts with anything male', 'brags about her handsome fiancé', 'recently saw her picking up younger guys', et cetera. I also spoke to people from the sewing club," Jenny continued, turning the page, "and it looks like she's not

really devoted to the club. She's the only sixth-year, but she's only the vice-president. This is all just testimony, of course, so we have to take it with a grain of salt."

"But if bad rumors're all we've got, a grain of salt isn't gonna make any of 'em better," Natalia pointed out.

"That's one way of looking at it. I have nothing else to report."

Nick raised a hand. "I have also heard similar rumors. Some acquaintances tell me that SC Bridget would entice male students into going out on dates with her off-campus. But none of them would last—the moment the boy decides to get serious, SC Bridget abandons him and ends the relationship."

"Isn't that an exaggeration?" asked Natalia.

"Indeed, these accounts do seem a little unrealistic. But whatever the case, we can conclude that SC Bridget is making no attempt to hide her actions."

"Hmm..."

"I cannot forgive a cheater!" Meg cried, munching on a biscuit. "Of course if we had not received the request she is a stranger to us, but now that we are here I will investigate very much! Next time I will take photos, I swear it! I will trail after her! Jenny, please give me special training today!"

"Sure, but..." unusually for her, Jenny trailed off.

"Yes? What is the matter?"

"Isn't tomorrow your birthday, Megmica?"

"Yes, it is."

"We all talked about it and decided we'd throw you a party at the office tomorrow. But you're so fired up it feels like you might not be able to enjoy the party."

Meg looked around at the others.

Natalia, Nick and Larry all clearly had mixed feelings about holding the party now.

"Ah! Thank you so much, everyone," Meg said with a smile, but she went on to declare, "I will receive your feelings gratefully! But from tomorrow I wish to pour my power into answering this request!"

* * *

The next day. The 14th day of the second month.

The weather in the Capital District was back to normal.

Much of the snow had been cleared from the grounds, allowing students to move about more freely. Makeup classes were almost done as well, bringing a sense of normalcy back to the 4th Capital Secondary School.

It was lunchtime.

"Hey man, I got lunch!" Larry called, opening the door to Seron's dorm room. He was carrying his school bag and three paper bags containing their lunches.

"Thanks, Larry. Have a seat."

Seron went into the hall, looked around, then flipped over the sign on his door from 'RA AVAILABLE' to 'ON BREAK'.

Seron's new room was about 50 percent larger than the average unit. It was furnished with the same things as the others, with the addition of a small table with four chairs around it.

Larry and Seron sat opposite one another at the table. Larry tore open the three paper bags vertically.

"We've got a ham-and-lettuce bagel sandwich, the usual roast beef sandwich, and—this is one of yours—a tomato cheeseburger. Which one d'you want?"

"The burger."

"Here you go, a taste of home. And here's your orange juice."

Three servings of food and two beverages were laid out on the table. Two servings of the food were for Larry, who was a big eater.

They each prayed briefly before starting on their meals.

Seron ate as he first listened to Larry's report.

"—and that's about it for what happened yesterday. SC Bridget is definitely cheating on SC Kenneth, and Megmica is furious. Says she's gonna tail SC Bridget properly after school today to get that picture. Obviously, we didn't tell Megmica about the allegations about SC Kenneth."

"I see. Thanks, Larry. You're a big help."

"If you're inviting me all the way here for reports, I assume you've got an idea about all this."

"I suppose. I don't know whether to call it an answer or a theory, so I can't say for sure. But..."

"You don't have to tell me if you're not comfortable with it. You've always got a good reason for keeping secrets. I trust you, buddy."

"Thanks, Larry. I want to get more evidence before I say anything."

Larry quickly finished off his bagel before picking up the roast beef sandwich. He finished it also in the blink of an eye and turned to Seron.

"Have you properly talked to Megmica at all since then?"

Seron continued to chew slowly on his food. He swallowed and replied as blankly as ever,

"No, not yet."

So sudden was the answer that Larry could not help but worry.

"Today's her birthday, you know?"

"Yeah. We all shared our birthdays before, I remember."

"...Did you get her a present, by any chance?"

"No. I didn't."

"...You know, I'm not saying you should go up to her and ask her out, but maybe you should try and co-operate. Help her out, you know? And maybe she'll change her mind—"

Larry paused. Then his eyes widened.

"I get it now! I'm such an idiot! You were gonna do that from the start, weren't you?"

Seron nodded slightly, saying nothing. Larry breathed a loud sigh of relief.

"Now this is getting interesting. Don't worry about messing this up, Seron. Her opinion of you couldn't possibly get worse at this point!"

A strange expression came over Seron.

“It’s true,” said Larry, “The worst is over. Now it’s time to wash away that disgrace and recover your honor! Solve this problem in one go and show her what you’re made of!”

“...All right. I’ll do my best.”

“Atta boy, Seron!”

“I’m going to tell you something, Larry. Don’t let anyone else know.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Today after school, I’m going to—”

Once Seron had finished speaking,

“WHAAAAAAT?!”

Larry’s jaw hit the floor.

* * *

After school.

The locker area on the first floor of the main building was bustling with students.

The lockers of every student in the school were lined up there like headstones at a cemetery. Students came and went in a hurry.

Because students had to go to different classrooms for each class, they had to drop off and pick up textbooks at their lockers regularly. Lockers also housed gym uniforms, things for club activities, and coats during the winter.

At that moment, a beautiful girl with golden hair was opening locker number 6333.

And a short distance away—

“She is there.” “There she is.”

Meg and Jenny were watching carefully. Both were wearing leather bags containing rangefinder cameras over their left shoulders.

The cameras were loaded with the most sensitive film they could get their hands on and wide-angle lenses with the greatest depth of field.

That was not all. Meg and Jenny were wearing not their usual leather shoes, but white canvas sneakers with rubber soles.

“What do you think she’ll do now?” Jenny asked, staring at Bridget.

“She may go to the sewing club, I think.”

“Dunno about that. Apparently she doesn’t attend meetings all that much.”

Jenny and Megmica pretended to be lost in conversation, but their gazes were locked on their target.

Bridget was getting her textbooks at her locker. But suddenly her hand froze as though she had noticed something.

“I wonder what is for snacks today.”

“I have no idea, but I’m happy as long as it’s good.”

They made a point of carrying on an irrelevant conversation and discreetly cast glances to the side. Bridget seemed to have not noticed them, as she resumed putting her textbooks into her bag.

At that time of the day, most students headed either to the gates or the club building where most school club offices were housed. This generally split the crowds into two streams. But Bridget did not follow either.

“I think she is going.”

“Hm.”

Bridget put her bag in her locker, closed it, and walked in a different direction from the other students. As she was empty-handed, she did not seem to be on her way home yet.

She was headed further into the main building, which was full of classrooms.

“Mission start. Let us follow her.”

“Right. I’ll keep my distance.”

Meg began to tail Bridget.

Jenny followed several seconds behind Meg, as her face was known.

As Meg watched, Bridget strode down the long hallway and crossed the covered walkway to the new building. She did not show a hint of suspicion.

Meg quietly followed. Her nervousness and anger gave her the face of a soldier headed for the front lines.

“Whoa,” a first-year passing Meg in the hall staggered away, frightened by her expression.

Jenny found herself silently taking out her camera at the sight, but she held herself back and put it away.

Bridget entered the new building.

Almost no students were left, as the building only housed classrooms. She strode down the hall, heels clicking elegantly.

Meg kept a safe distance and concealed her footsteps as she followed after Bridget.

Because the new building was nearly deserted, Meg would be easily spotted if Bridget were to turn. So she stopped following closely after her—instead, she would wait until Bridget turned a corner or went into a stairwell.

“It is my secret weapon...”

Each time, Meg would take out an extendable pole with a small mirror attached to the end. She would crouch down and hold out the mirror near the ground to check where her target was headed.

When the stairs turned, Meg listened carefully for the sound of Bridget’s footsteps so as to not lose her.

Jenny watched it all from behind.

“What’s gotten into her?” she wondered, taking a photo of Meg.

The reflection on Meg’s mirror showed Bridget enter a classroom on the fifth floor of the new building.

The building was empty enough as it was, but Bridget specifically chose to go to the top floor, where the halls were completely deserted.

About 20 meters from the classroom entrance was the girls’ bathroom.

Meg crept from the stairwell and slowly opened the bathroom door, slipping inside. Then she turned and gestured for Jenny to join her.

Naturally, there was no one in the bathroom. Even the lights were off.

“So far so good. You’re pretty good at tailing people, Megmica,” said Jenny.

Meg turned, excited. “Heh heh. Thank you, Jenny. Even when I played ‘police and thieves’ when I was young, it was my talent to hide secretly. This mirror is great. It would have been very convenient with this back then! I would have been the hero of my friends!”

“Shh. —You think she’s meeting someone in that classroom?”

“It is not meeting—it is cheating!” Meg corrected Jenny indignantly.

“I suppose you’re right. She’s pretty smart, using the new building and not the main one,” Jenny remarked.

“Yes.” Meg nodded.

Unlike in the other buildings, the classrooms in the new building did not have windows that opened into the hallways. This was because classrooms in the new building included overhead projectors, which necessitated complete darkness in the rooms. The windows that opened outside were equipped with light-blocking curtains.

The walls were thin so that the layout could be changed easily. Teachers would often tell off students who were chatting in the hallways.

In other words, the new classroom was deserted, hidden from view, and perfect for listening out for intruders. It was the ideal location for a romantic tryst.

“The guy might already be inside.”

“I will secretly pass by in front once. I will know if I can hear two voices.”

It was a sound plan. Jenny nodded.

“We’ve got no other choice. What’re you gonna do if the guy’s in there?”

“I will listen and check the situation, then secretly open the door to scout. Then I will take the photo and run away! The door is a sliding type of door, so they will not notice if I open it slowly. Then you must run too, Jenny! I wish you fortune.”

“Calm down, we don’t need to go that far yet. We can always take photos from behind once they leave the classroom.”

“Then it will not be proof that they kissed.”

“Being caught alone in a time and place like this is proof enough. We can take kissing photos later, when we catch them unprepared.”

“That is true, but...”

“Just go and scout out the place for now. If one of them happens to look outside and meet your gaze, just say hi really quickly and keep walking like nothing’s wrong.”

“I understand! Strauski, onward!”

Showing her palm face-up in a Western salute, Meg cautiously slid open the bathroom door. She looked to her left and right before creeping outside.

“All right...” Jenny peered out and watched through the mirror.

Meg walked all the way to the middle of the hallway, but once she was by the classroom she clung to the wall. And with all the speed of a lazy bull or a tortoise, she slid all the way across to the back door of the classroom.

Once she was past the classroom, Meg turned around and walked normally—but quietly—all the way back to the bathroom where Jenny waited.

“Phew...I was worried,” Meg sighed, her breaths ragged.

“Well?”

“I heard no sound. I do not think there is anyone else in the classroom.”

“I see. Then her guy’s bound to show up any minute now. Good thing you didn’t run into him.”

“Then let us watch from here! Because he is a boy he will not come in here.”

“What if SC Bridget decides to use the ladies’ room?”

“Then it is difficult! But—”

“Shh!”

Jenny put a hand over Meg’s mouth.

The sound of leather shoes against the stairs began to resound from the stairwell. Someone was coming upstairs.

“He’s here,” Jenny concluded, and crept towards the bathroom door again with Meg. They both squatted there and waited.

Without a word, Jenny pointed at the classroom and at her mirror.

She meant that she would use the mirror once the boy had passed the bathroom. Meg nodded again and again.

The footsteps grew louder and louder, arriving at their hallway. The sounds changed from shoes-on-stairs to shoes-on-floor.

As Meg and Jenny held their breaths, the footsteps came upon them. From the gait they likely belonged to a boy.

When the footsteps were loudest—when the owner of the footsteps passed by the bathroom door—Meg let herself breathe for a split second before pushing her hands against her mouth.

The footsteps did not stop. They slowly grew distant.

“Phew...” Meg released the breath she was holding.

Jenny slightly opened the door and maneuvered the mirror out the gap.

At the same time, the footsteps stopped and the classroom door quietly opened and closed.

“He just went inside,” said Jenny, “Although all I saw were his feet.”

“That means the cheater boy went into that classroom?”

“Yes.”

“I will go take photos!”

“...I guess this counts as an opportunity,” Jenny said, and gave Meg her orders.

Because there was one door at each end of the classroom, Meg and Jenny would each watch one door.

They would slowly open the sliding doors and get a grasp of the situation with their mirrors first.

If possible, they would take photos of Bridget’s infidelity through the gap in the doorway—but they would not overextend themselves.

“I understand... I, Strauski Megmica, will do her best as a member of the newspaper club.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Megmica. I’ll take care of the main photos. Let’s go.”

Slowly, they crept out of the bathroom.

And quietly, cautiously, they walked towards the classroom.

Meg took up her position by the door at the front of the classroom, and Jenny crouched down at the back door.

It was close enough to hear the conversation taking place inside.

“—still as cute as before.”

A female voice. It belonged to Bridget.

The boy was listening silently, it seemed.

“Why’s he not saying anything?” Jenny wondered. Meg gave her a look.

Jenny nodded.

Slowly, they reached for the door handles and pushed the cushioned edges in minuscule increments.

The doors slid open silently. The gaps Meg and Jenny wanted were created with ease.

At the same time, the boy finally spoke.

“You’ve been approaching multiple boys on campus, SC Bridget.”

“Huh?” “Hm?”

The voice was familiar to Meg and Jenny, who were about to stick their mirrors through the doorways.

“Oh, is that what you wanted to talk about? All right. I admit it. I like cute boys. It’s only natural to go after things you like.”

Jenny and Meg looked at their mirrors.

The curtains in the room were half-open. And sitting face-to-face in the middle of that classroom were two people.

One was, of course, Bridget.

And the other was Seron Maxwell.

* * *

<WHAAAAAT?! She was cheating with SC Seron?!>

<Calm down, newbie. I mean, I was just as surprised as you, but I remembered something.>

<I get it! SC Seron was helping out with SC Bridget’s request, too. So he might have put a letter in her locker and asked to meet with her.>

<Yeah. That was all fine and dandy, except for the part where he didn’t tell me anything.>

<I guess it was all right, then?>

<Unfortunately, not everyone there knew about SC Bridget’s request.>

<Huh...? Oh no!>

<Yep. Megmica.>

<No way...>

<What do you think happened then?>

<Well, the word 'rampage' comes to mind.>

<Bingo.>

* * *



“What is this!” Meg cried, slamming the door open and allowing her trained soprano to fill the room.

“Eek!”

Bridget flinched with a girlish scream.

“Whoa!”

Seron, meanwhile, tried to get out of his seat but tripped over a desk and fell.

It took a moment for the noises to die down.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack. Who are you?” Bridget said nonchalantly to Meg, who stood at the door.

“Hello,” Jenny said, opening the other door and stepping inside before Meg could say a word, “This is Strauski Megmica. She’s also a member of the newspaper club.”

“Hello there, president Jones,”

“Good afternoon.”

“I was just having a nice chat with Seron here—” Bridget began, but Meg cut her off.

“Cheating is bad! You have a fiancé! So you must not do this!”

“What?”

“I have the evidence! The immovable evidence! I am certain!”

“What are you talking about?”

At that moment, Meg realized that she had let slip Kenneth’s request. She deflated instantly.

“Oh...er...”

“What a funny girl you are. I think you have the wrong idea,” Bridget said with a confident smile.

“What are you doing here?” Even Seron joined Bridget, getting off the floor.

Meg fell into complete silence. It had been less than a minute since her outburst.

“Sorry for the commotion,” Jenny said, moving next to Meg, “What were you and Seron talking about?”

Bridget pushed back her golden hair. For a second, her red earring glinted.

“All we’ve done so far was exchange pleasantries. You know, talking about how cute Seron is and how I’d just love to eat him up.”

“That’s a funny way of saying hi,” Jenny pointed out.

“Call it the mature way.”

“I see. It might be a little too mature for a fourth-year, though.”

“Maybe.”

“Seron is a fourth-year.”

“Oh? I think he’s studying hard enough for university.”

The conversation began with an exchange of fire. Then—

“So what brings you here?” asked Bridget. “Seron’s letter said we would be meeting alone. It was a little exciting, imagining the two of us alone here in this empty classroom.”

Meg puffed up her cheeks.

“I think we’ve just had a communication issue with Seron here,” Jenny replied.

“I see.”

“And just to let you know, I think the recording device will be ready earlier than I expected. It’ll be good to go after school on the 16th.”

“That’s great. Then we’ll strike while the iron is hot and go ahead with the plan as soon as possible.”

“Huh?” Meg was lost, alone out of the loop about Bridget’s request.

“Sorry, Meg,” said Jenny, “I’ll explain later, so do you mind saving your questions for then?”

“Oh. Yes...I understand,” Meg replied, shoulders sagging. Bridget smiled.

“If you’re finished, could you leave us alone now? I have so much to talk to Seron about. And so much I’d like to teach him.”

“Ah—” Meg made to speak, but she was cut off.

“Don’t make such a scary face, little girl. I’m not going to eat him.”

“But—”

“You remind me of an angry puppy.”

That was when Seron intervened.

“Jenny. Megmica.” The girls turned. “I have something to discuss with SC Bridget. I can make it to the office tomorrow, so I’ll explain everything then.”

It almost sounded like he was shooing them away.

“Jenny! Let us go!” Meg spat, and turned.

But when she spotted Bridget slide uncomfortably close to Seron, she stopped.

“Huh?”

Jenny’s gaze followed Meg’s.

“Oh.”

And she quickly took out her camera.

Bridget went up to Seron, who stood still in the middle of the room, and planted a kiss on his mouth.

All Jenny and Meg could see was Bridget’s back and her head of blond hair, which blocked Seron’s face completely.

Click.

Jenny’s camera captured the moment. She quickly put the camera back in her bag. Two seconds later, Bridget pulled back.

Seron stood in a blank daze.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh—”

And Meg stammered, her jaw agape.

“Oh? Were you two still here?” Bridget asked sarcastically. She put on a smile.

“Please excuse me!” Meg cried loud enough to rattle the windows, and took off as though about to break down the classroom doors on the way.

“Excuse us,” Jenny said, also in shock. She slowly closed the door.

Meg and Jenny were gone.

“What are you really after, SC Bridget?” Seron asked the beauty before him.

“What do you mean? I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she replied nonchalantly.
“Anyway, we’re finally alone now. Why don’t we try something a little more romantic?”

Seron’s reply was calm.

“No thank you.”

Chapter 7: Kenneth

The 15th day of the second month.

It was lunchtime at the cafeteria. The weather was clear.

“We have the photo we need, but I’m kinda iffy on using one with Seron in it.”

“It is no matter! Just give it to SC Kenneth!”

“Calm down, Megmica.”

“Indeed. You have some sauce on your face.”

Everyone but Seron was sitting at the same table.

The table was at a corner of the cafeteria. Because it was so far from the counter and close to the walls, it was poorly heated. That kept other students away from the vicinity.

A single black-and-white photograph lay in the middle of the table, surrounded by empty plates on platters.

The photo was 25 centimeters by 30 centimeters in size. It depicted Seron and Bridget standing in a classroom.

Though Bridget’s golden hair covered their faces, from the way they stood it was clear that they were kissing. Seron’s face was almost completely concealed. Only someone who knew him in person would recognize him from the photo.

But the newspaper club, naturally, could tell who he was. Nick and Natalia were shocked when they arrived at the table (having been told by Jenny over the telephone the previous night to meet up at lunch).

“It is unforgivable!”

But their shock was overshadowed by Meg’s continued outrage, giving way to calm.

“Well, in a way this might be a good thing,” Natalia said, having finished two servings of food, “We got our job done quick. The guy being Seron might make it look like we goaded SC Bridget into this, but what SC Kenneth doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

“Indeed. I suppose we have completed SC Kenneth’s request, then,” Nick said nonchalantly, “That was easier than I had expected.”

Larry was silent the whole time.

“It is unbelievable! SC Bridget, who is doing this even though she has a fiancé! And Seron, who is kissing happily without running away!” Meg cried, holding the edge of the table in a vise-like grip.

“Oh?” Natalia raised a playful eyebrow. “Getting angry at SC Bridget I can agree with, but why’re you so angry at Seron?”

“Pardon? What is it?”

“Even if Seron has a crush on you, you’ve never really talked with him about it. So Seron’s free to think you turned him down, and he’s allowed to kiss or date or marry whoever he wants. Right?”

Megmica could not retort. Instead, she picked up her platter. “I have my next class now. Excuse me first!”

“Come to the office after class, okay?” said Jenny, “We’re gonna have a strategy meeting for tomorrow.”

“I understand... Please excuse me.”

Larry hesitated for a second, but he decided to speak.

“Seron’s coming too.”

“I understand. But I am not angry. Please excuse me.”

The others watched as Meg walked away with puffy cheeks.

“Seriously...” Larry sighed.

“Your lunch not going down, Larry?”

“You’re the only one who’s always got food on her mind, Lia.”

“So what’s wrong?”

“Today’s meeting’s gonna be tense.”

“Oh, that’s what’s bothering you? Don’t worry, you’re probably right,” Natalia said nonchalantly.

“Finally, a true confrontation,” Nick said with a smile and a nod, “I’m looking forward to—er, I mean, I am quite worried.”

“You don’t have to bother acting nice, Nick,” Larry sighed. “Is this really gonna work out for the best, Seron?” he wondered quietly.

* * *

“How many more times do you intend to skip practice, Natalia?”

Immediately after school, Natalia had been caught at her locker by Lena Portman, who was now a sixth-year and still the president of the orchestra club.

“I will drag you to the music room on a leash if I have to. It’s such a relief that you’re not in the woodwind or brass sections.”

“Sorry, SC Portman, but I don’t think I can make it today.”

“And why is that? Just try and convince me if you can.”

“Sure. Thing is—”

“Yes?”

“The newspaper club’s holding an important meeting today to determine Megmica’s fate.”

“...”

“I have to be there to calm her down.”

“...”

“Otherwise she’ll lose her mind. Might grow to 10 times her size and go on a bloody rampage. She’ll destroy the campus, the Capital District—I’m sure the Confederation Army’ll bring in their tank brigade to take her down in the end, but no one wants that.”

“...”

“Which is why I’ll be ditching today.”

* * *

The members gathered one by one at the office.

As usual, Larry was the first to arrive. It was essentially a given as his last class of the day was closest to the office.

“Good afternoon.” “Hey Larry.”

Nick and Jenny were next.

“Hi guys!”

Natalia was next. As usual, she had brought snacks—a box of large donuts and her so-called purifying chocolates.

And as usual, Larry got to work brewing tea.

“I am here... Good afternoon, everyone,” Meg said, stepping inside with a complicated look.

Several minutes later.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Seron entered the office. It had been a long time since all six members were gathered together.

Seron sat on the sofa, but Meg—sitting directly across from him—made a point of looking away.

“There, there, have a donut. Or some chocolate.”

Natalia tried to push a piece of chocolate into Meg’s mouth, but Meg leaned away in a show of refusal, allowing the chocolate to go to Natalia instead.

“All right,” Jenny began, “Now that we finally have everyone together, let’s get down to business. Ready?”

“Yeah!” “No objections here.”

Amidst the enthusiastic responses, however, Seron and Meg remained silent. Like Roxche and Sou Be-Il locked in a cold war over the Lutoni again, they sat quietly on either side of the table. Jenny looked at them both.

“Today, we’ll be discussing the two requests that SC Kenneth and SC Bridget have given us. I explained the request from SC Bridget to Megmica yesterday, too.”

“Yes, I listened to the explanation,” Meg said coolly, “It was a very big surprise, but I understand the reason it was secret from me.”

Then—

“But that does not mean I can forgive SC Bridget’s cheating! This and that are very different problems!”

“Indeed. We have yet to confirm the allegations of SC Kenneth’s verbal abuse,” Nick said with a nod.

Natalia stopped mid-donut. “We’ll get our answer tomorrow if we’re lucky. Something about SC Bridget tells me this won’t be too hard for us,” she said, reaching for more chocolate. Seron stared.

“Want some?”

“No thank you.”

Jenny continued the conversation. “I asked Mr. Kurtz and it looks like we’ll have the recorder at the office by tomorrow morning. We’ll set up the cables at lunchtime. It won’t be as hard as before.”

Everyone nodded.

Thanks to the recent bout of warmer weather, the snow on the grounds had melted to the point where people could cross without difficulty. It would be much easier to set up the cables than it was with Stella's case, when the club had to bury the cables all the way to the tree.

"So we're going ahead with the plan. After school tomorrow, we'll have SC Bridget call out SC Kenneth. Then we record their conversation and see if he really is abusing her. If her accusations turn out to be true, then we have our evidence."

The others nodded again.

Meg seemed very displeased, but she said nothing.

"We have two possibilities," Jenny said, holding up a finger. "First, SC Kenneth is a gentleman who is not abusing SC Bridget. In other words, SC Bridget is lying. In that case—"

"It is unforgivable!"

"Easy there, Megmica. Keep going, chief."

"Right. In that case, it's simple. Hand this photo to SC Kenneth and explain everything we found out. SC Kenneth can break off the engagement and live his own life. As for SC Bridget, well, she'll have to own up to what she's done but she'll be free too, so it's not all bad. This possibility will solve everything."

Everyone but Seron nodded. Meg gave an especially pronounced nod.

"The problem is the second possibility," Jenny said, holding up another finger, "if SC Kenneth heaps verbal abuse on SC Bridget when they're alone, just like she said. In other words, they're both tormenting each other. We're gonna have to take one side or the other."

"Of course it is SC Kenneth! She is cheating like so, so he can be angry to her!" Meg argued, but Nick had a rebuttal.

"But Megmica, we still have no idea about the extent of his verbal abuse. For all we know, tomorrow we may hear profanities and insults that make us cringe. What would you do then?"

"Then..." Meg quieted down, and fell into thought. "I do not know..."

"Or maybe we should just expose it all to both families," Jenny suggested. No one responded.

After a time, Natalia finally broke the silence.

"Well, no need to rush into anything. Have some donuts."

Seron reached for the tin of chocolate instead. "May I?"

"Sure, sure."

Once he had permission, he picked up a piece of chocolate and popped it into his mouth. Just as Seron finished the piece, Larry spoke.

"What's your take on this?"

All eyes fell on Seron.

"I can't tell you," Seron confessed.

Larry raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"What'd you mean?" asked Natalia.

"You're sounding real funny, Seron," said Jenny.

Nick simply smiled.

"What do you mean, Seron?!" Meg cried. "This is a newspaper club activity. You must tell your opinions!"

Seron remained silent even in the midst of Meg's angry arguments.

"We are all working hard to solve this problem. So you must say clearly what your thoughts are too, Seron!"

Seron replied,

"This time, I'm afraid I can't agree with that."

Again, he was being honest almost to the point of foolishness.

"That is not right!" Meg exclaimed.

Next to Seron, Larry scratched his head. There was a look of defeat on his face.

Meg and Seron's stubborn argument continued for some time.

"You are disgraceful, Seron! You are very smart, yes, but you can tell us what you are thinking, no?"

"Not this time, I can't."

"What is the reason?"

"I can't say that, either."

"Then when can you say it?"

"I don't know. I just don't have enough information."

"On whose side do you wish to stand, Seron? SC Bridget? Or SC Kenneth?"

"I can't say yet."

"But from your kiss yesterday, are you not leaned to SC Bridget?"

"That's not true."

"I cannot believe! And about what did you speak with her yesterday?"

"I can't say yet."

"You are leaned to SC Bridget, then! Because you kissed?"

Meg was beginning to take her frustrations in the wrong direction. Natalia cast Jenny a look just as she brought a piece of chocolate into her mouth.

"I wish to break this engagement for SC Kenneth's happiness!" Meg declared. Something was clearly wrong with her argument. "Of course there is the suspicion that SC Kenneth is a verbal abuser, but put this aside, and I am clearly on SC Kenneth's side."

Seron listened silently.

"To say honestly, SC Kenneth's verbal abuse suspicions will be removed tomorrow, I think! It is a thought and not a conclusion, and it is just a feeling! But SC Kenneth is the innocent!"

Though Kenneth was not on trial and there was no real evidence yet, Meg was being an excellent defense lawyer. Tears welled in her eyes and her voice came out in half-sobs.

"Well, hopefully you're right." "We do not yet have concrete evidence." "Yeah."

Natalia, Nick, and Jenny each threw out a comment. Larry wisely opted to remain silent.

"On whose side are you on, Seron? Say it clearly!"

'On yours,' Larry thought, but he did not say so. Seron's expression remained inscrutable.

"A person who cannot say it clearly can look like a person with no opinions! It cannot be helped!"

Only then did he look slightly crestfallen.

Larry cast Seron a glance. He could imagine his desperation.

But Seron stubbornly kept silent.

Several seconds later,

“If I had to say,” Seron finally said, as though against his will, “I’m also probably on SC Kenneth’s side.”

“What? Pardon?” Meg asked. The others seemed just as surprised as she was. “Please wait, what did you just say?”

“If I had to say—if I really had to pick one or the other, I’m on SC Kenneth’s side,” Seron repeated himself.

Meg could not say anything. Jenny spoke instead.

“Wow. So you’ve been thinking that way from the start?”

“Been cooking up a theory behind our backs? Creepy,” Natalia said.

“I cannot say I would call it ‘creepy’, but I do think it is very much like Seron to be this way,” Nick remarked.

“That’s a relief!” cried Larry. “You didn’t want to say anything conclusive until you had evidence, eh? You’re always so cautious about everything. You wanted to wait till you could be 100% sure.”

Seron nodded.

“Whoa, Larry’s being useful for once!” Natalia cheered, taking a donut in each hand. “Here’s your reward, boys.” Leaning forward, she stuffed one into Larry’s mouth and the other into Seron’s.

“Mmph.” “Mm.”

“Cheese-flavored with cheese filling. It’s good. Creative. Moved me to tears. Now enjoy it!”

The boys were forced to chew before they could speak again.

“S-Seron is on SC Kenneth’s side? I do not believe it!” Meg cried, rising from her seat. “But Seron kissed!”

Seron seemed to want to say something to that, but he had not finished the donut.

“And you kissed twice!”

Seron paused.

The others stared at Meg.

Larry, who finished his donut first, asked the question on their minds.

“Twice?”

“Yes! Twice!”

“Huh? He kissed her once yesterday after school, we know that. But when else?”

“On the 8th day! At the central stairs! SC Kenneth said to us when he came to request, he saw something sad!”

“Come to think of it...” “I remember that.” “Indeed. He did mention something to that effect.”

Jenny, Natalia, and Nick seemed to remember what Kenneth had mentioned. Larry turned to Seron in shock.

“That was you too?!”

Seron chewed as fast as he possibly could so he could finally swallow the donut and respond.

Then,

“Everyone!” he cried in an unusually loud voice. “SC Kenneth said that? Really?”

“He did!” “Indeed he did,” Meg and Nick replied. The others nodded.

“Megmica. Where did you see us from?”

This time, the question was directed solely at Meg. She was taken aback for a moment at Seron’s sharp gaze, but she quickly recovered.

“At the top of the central stairs! I was in the halls at the time, you see. I coincidentally saw your back in the new building and followed to talk with the two of us alone, but...I saw you happily kiss SC Bridget at the landing and went home then.”

“I see...”

Seron’s gaze on Meg grew even sharper. But even when Meg moved away, his gaze remained fixed to the spot.

“Was there anyone else there?”

“Pardon? No... I was the only one at the stairs.”

Meg’s tone returned to normal, spooked by Seron’s sudden show of emotion.

“The landing I met SC Bridget at isn’t visible from downstairs,” Seron said.

“Yeah.” Larry nodded.

“And you’re saying SC Kenneth saw us? From where?”

“The grounds, I think. You know how the landing’s totally visible, what with the big glass wall. Heck, you can see the entire staircase top to bottom,” Natalia pointed out. Everyone else nodded in understanding.

And as for Seron—

“I see...”

He nodded in even deeper understanding.

Then he said nothing.

“Oh? That it for your defense, Seron?” Natalia quipped, but Seron still did not respond. Jenny took over in his stead.

“Anyway, I’m surprised she kissed you twice. I’m sure the first time she got you by surprise too—”

—Meg was visibly angry, but she did not interrupt Jenny—

“But more importantly, about tomorrow,” Jenny changed the subject, holding her notepad. She went over their plans.

They would have Bridget call Kenneth to the big oak tree behind the building, which was clearly visible from the office window. The meeting time would be one hour after classes ended.

They would have Bridget bring up the topic of the arranged marriage, which was sure to bother Kenneth.

The newspaper club would listen to the conversation and record it, and even take photographs in case Kenneth decided to resort to physical violence.

After that, it was up to the club to decide what to do with the evidence.

“Is everyone clear?” asked Jenny.

“Sure.” “Yep.” “Excellent plan.” “I am clear.”

Everyone but Seron responded.

“And what about you?” Jenny asked to the barely-present Seron Maxwell.

Seron said nothing.

“Nat, stuff a donut in his mouth.”

“Sure. Which flavor?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Larry gently elbowed Seron.

“Huh?”

“Sorry to bother you, man, but Jenfie’s asking you a question.”

“She is?”

“Yes. About tomorrow’s plan. We’re setting up microphones and recording the conversation. Sound good?”

“Oh. Er...yeah, sure,” Seron finally replied. Jenny sighed.

“So what’ll it be?” asked Natalia. “Chocolate or black tea?”

* * *

That evening, at the Strauski residence.

Meg and her brothers were eating on their own because their parents were out.

On the table in the large dining room of the luxury apartment was a Roxchean-style meal prepared by the housekeeper.

The meal included vegetable salad, apple juice, and chicken-and-macaroni gratin with sliced onions and a heaping helping of cheese.

It was Meg’s job to move the gratin to the plate and warm it in the oven.

“More cheese, Big Sis! Y’gotta add more!” “Yeah!”

Kurt and Johan begged their sister.

“Oh, all right.”

In response, Meg dumped a veritable mountain of grated cheese onto the dish. As putting it in the oven would inevitably result in a cheese avalanche, she had to move the gratin to a larger dish.

“May peace be upon the royal family, the people, and the land of the setting sun,” the siblings prayed in Bezelese before digging in.

“GRATIN!”

“GRATIN!”

The boys were not quite young enough to stuff themselves full of the piping-hot gratin in their excitement—they made sure to blow on their food before taking a bite.

“It’s soooooooo good!” “It’s good! I love cheese!”

The boys cheered as they cooled off their food just enough to not burn themselves, shoving the scrumptiously browned cheese into their mouths.

Meg, on the other hand, simply stared at her gratin and the cheese for some time.

“Your food’s gonna get cold, Big Sis,” Johan pointed out.

“Hmph!”

Meg snorted and stabbed a piece of chicken through the cheese. And she began to eat.

She was not even trying to hide her anger at the cheese—or perhaps something else. Kurt noticed.

“Are you gonna overeat again and get sick, Big Sis? You stuffed yourself yesterday too,” he said in Roxchean.

“No,” Meg replied in Bezelese. She had gorged on food at her birthday party the previous day.

“That’s good. Hope you don’t hafta go back to the digestive medicine again today. That would suck.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll eat slowly,” Meg replied, slowing down to a normal pace.

“I guess being in secondary school is rough. It’s good to be young.”

“Kurt, you’re only in first year. Don’t act like you know everything.”

Brother and sister conversed in different languages over the dinner table. Johan, meanwhile, paid them no attention as he downed his gratin.

“I’m a secondary school kid too, Big Sis.”

“It’s only going to get harder for you from here on out. Stuff happens in school that’ll make your stomach hurt.”

“Really.”

“For example,” Meg said, putting down her fork, “I have this friend.”

“What’s she like?”

“She says there’s this guy who likes her.”

“It’s good to be young.”

“But the guy just can’t work up the courage to ask her out.”

“That’s stupid of him. If I were him I’d just go up to her and say ‘I love you!’” Kurt mused.

“I love you!” Johan parroted his brother, still wrangling his gratin.

“Anyway, that’s what he’s like. But one day someone found out that he likes my friend, and—”

“I see. Other people got fed up with this guy being all wishy-washy and told the girl for him. Must’ve made them feel better.”

“Wh-why do you say that?”

“Obviously, cause it’s frustrating to watch. Both the guy who can’t confess and the girl who doesn’t notice.”

“...”

“Life is short. You gotta get out there and get the girl or fail in a blaze of glory, basically.”

“A ‘blaze of...’?”

“Oh, it means you gotta try as hard as you can and go down fighting,” Kurt replied, mixing in Bezelese to simplify the explanation. Then he shoveled gratin into his mouth.

“But it’s too much of a risk if failure means dying,” Meg pointed out.

“Maybe,” Kurt replied, “But it’s better than just dragging things out forever. And besides, love isn’t like a war. Even if you lose, you don’t die or anything. You can just get back on your feet and move on. Waste less time. Am I wrong?”

Meg had been argued into submission by a 12-year-old. She put lukewarm gratin into her mouth.

For some time the meal continued in silence.

But Meg spoke once again.

“About that girl.”

“Huh? That friend you were talking about?”

“Yeah. Apparently the guy didn’t actually confess properly to her even after he got found out.”

“He’s such an idiot.”

“Yeah. I thought that was the end of that, but…”

“There’s more?”

“Apparently the girl doesn’t know why, but she keeps feeling frustrated, she gets angry when she looks at him, and keeps acting cold to him. She doesn’t know herself why she feels like that, which is frustrating her even more,” Meg said firmly, and very quickly.

Kurt stopped mid-salad.

“That’s it?”

“What do you—”

“That’s totally simple, though. You wanna know why the girl’s so angry?”

“Y-yeah, that’s why she consulted me in the first place!”

“Then tell her as soon as you see her tomorrow,” Kurt said, putting down his fork and reaching for his apple juice. He sounded very bored. “She’s madly in love with the guy. So she’s waiting for him to ask her out, although she doesn’t even realize it.”

“…”

“You okay, Big Sis?”

Meg stood.

“I-I have to go to the bathroom.”

“C’mon, we’re eating here!” Kurt complained as Meg took off.

“We’re eating here,” Johan parroted his brother.

* * *

<So the day finally came.>

<…>

<Are you asleep, newbie?>

<No, I was just too shocked to say anything.>

<Are you getting tired? Should I tell you the rest later?>

<It’s all right. I have the right and duty to listen to this story to the end.>

* * *

The 16th day of the second month.

On the day of the plan, heavy snow once again enveloped the Capital District.

Though there was almost no wind, snow piled up endlessly on the roads that had only just begun to dry.

It was lunchtime.

“I guess he couldn’t possibly see us from here, so there isn’t much to worry about.”

“The weather report says the snow’s going to ease up in the afternoon.”

“I hope it does.”

Larry, Seron, and Jenny were preparing the recording equipment.

Snow fell in clumps from the branches of the massive oak tree on the grounds behind the building.

“I’m surprised it’s managed to grow this big through so many winters,” Larry remarked, hiding a microphone and remembering how he had once climbed the tree. This time, the club was hiding two microphones in snowdrifts and one between the branches.

They covered the microphones with white cloth and scattered snow on top to conceal them.

“We have to dust off the snow once before we start using them. Could you do that, Larry? It has to be straight after class,” said Jenny.

“Sure thing,” Larry replied with a smile.

Their coats covered in snow, Jenny, Seron, and Larry buried the microphone cables all the way back to the office. It was not difficult—all they had to do was step on the length of the cables so that snow would cover them. The snow falling later on would cover the cables completely.

The cables led directly to the newspaper club office through an open window.

Jenny and Larry shook off the snow from their clothes and connected the cables to the recorder.

The recording device was a machine the size of a small suitcase with two reels sticking out of it like arms. Jenny’s bodyguards had received permission from the school to bring it onto campus in the morning.

The desks against the wall had been cleared completely to make room for the recorder.

“Wow. I’d kill for one of these babies,” Larry said.

“It’s my uncle’s. You break it, you buy it.”

“I don’t think my allowance is gonna cover this.”

“Then you can pay once you’ve gotten ahead in life.”

“Ah, so you think I’m gonna get ahead? Thanks.”

“Correction. Work off your debt by working for free at one of our factories,” Jenny said, and promptly checked the recorder. “All right. Give it a try.”

“Right.”

Larry turned a flashlight on and off to signal Seron, who was still outside.

Though Larry was fluent in Morse code, Seron was not. So they decided on several signs to use ahead of time.

The heavy snowfall made it hard for Larry to make out Seron in the distance.

<Testing. Testing. I’m standing next to the tree and talking at normal volume. Can you hear me?>

Seron’s voice was carried all the way through the cables and came out clearly from the speakers.

The recording test was a success as well. Larry signaled at Seron for him to return.

Once Seron was in the office, Larry brewed tea. Then the three club members had sandwiches from the cafeteria as a late lunch.

“Good work, guys,” said Jenny, “And Seron Maxwell?”
Seron caught her glare mid-bite. “Hm?”
“You better spill your guts before the others get here.”
“What do you mean, Jenny?”
“Seron. What are you planning?”

* * *

After school.
The weather forecast was proven correct as the snow let up, slowing to a mild flurry.
Larry took off the moment class ended to check the microphones. First he dusted off the snow piled on the cloths, then covered them again.
He even brought a broom with him, which he used to hide his tracks completely.
When Larry returned to the office, he found Jenny and Seron checking the recorder again.
“I let SC Bridget know about the plan,” said Jenny, “and she said that SC Kenneth agreed to meet her today.”
“Great!” Larry cheered.
Seron nodded silently.
“So we’re going ahead with the plan as scheduled. I’m leaving photography to you this time, Larry.”
“Just leave it to me! It’s an honor to get to use this baby,” Larry said, casting a glance at the sturdy tripod by the window and the telephoto lens and single-lens reflex camera mounted on it.
The other club members also arrived earlier than usual.
“Today’s the day! Here—nothing like macarons for an eavesdropping session,” Natalia said, holding up a shopping bag stuffed with sweets.
Then came Nick. “It’s good to see the weather has improved. I hope the mystery will be solved once and for all today,” he remarked with his usual smile, hinting that there was a mystery to be solved at all.
“Today the truth will come to the light!” Meg declared as she entered, trying very hard to not make eye contact with Seron. “I believe that my intuition is not wrong!”
Though preparations were complete, there was still another half an hour to go before Bridget and Kenneth were scheduled to arrive.
“Let’s eat!”
So they had no choice but to follow Natalia’s suggestion. The newspaper club sat around on the sofas and relaxed.
“This is taking the wind out of my sails,” Larry said, sitting alone by the window and keeping an eye on the oak tree with a pair of sunglasses and binoculars. The oak tree simply stood alone in a world of white.
The hands of the clock continued to tick and tock, and the macarons disappeared into mouths at a rapid pace until it was five minutes before the designated time.
“I’m going to the bathroom,” Seron said, getting up.
“Hurry back or you’ll miss the conversation,” said Larry.

“It’s all right. We’re recording everything anyway,” Seron replied, grabbing his coat from the wall hanger.

Then he turned and called the name of the girl he loved, to whom he had not said a single word all day.

“Megmica.”

“Y-yes!” Meg replied, looking up.

“Do you believe in SC Kenneth?”

For several seconds Meg looked into Seron’s grey eyes, unable to answer.

Seron waited without averting his gaze.

Eventually Meg gave her reply.

“I do! Because he does not look to be a bad person!”

“I see. I think so too.”

The others thought they saw a hint of a smile on Seron’s lips.

The door opened. Then it closed.

Once Seron had taken his coat and left—

“Let’s get into position. I hate rushing at the last minute,” Jenny said, heading to the recorder.

“Sure.”

The others moved to the window as well. Placing a rug on the floor by the window, they squatted or knelt and wiped the glass and adjusted the lace curtain for a better view.

Finally, everyone picked up binoculars from the desk and checked their lenses. Larry checked the oak tree once more through the camera viewfinder.

The hands on the clock continued to move until it was one minute to the scheduled time.

“You think they’ll get here on time?” Natalia wondered, casting glances out the window.

“Yeah.” “I am certain they will,” Jenny and Nick replied simultaneously.

“Really? Why?”

Jenny let Nick explain.

“SC Kenneth seems almost serious to a fault. He will arrive exactly on time. As for SC Bridget, however, I wouldn’t put it past her to arrive late.”

“Right,” Natalia said with a nod, reaching for a macaron on the desk—

“There! SC Kenneth, from the left,” Larry hissed. Everyone picked up their binoculars.

“Mhm?” Natalia picked up her macaron anyway and put it in her mouth.

Jenny put a hand on the record button, but did not press it.

Kenneth appeared in the scene beyond the binoculars, crossing the snowy grounds from the left and approaching the oak tree. There was a hint of anxiety on his handsome face.

“SC Bridget’s not here yet,” Larry said, shaking his binoculars left and right.

The others looked around for her as well, but Kenneth was the only person in sight.

When he reached the oak tree, Kenneth checked his watch. The minute hand on the office wall arrived at the designated time at that very moment.

“Talk about accurate!” Natalia exclaimed.

“It is rude, being late after calling out someone oneself,” Meg snapped to someone who was not within earshot, puffing up her cheeks.

“By the way, it seems Seron is taking quite a while in the bathroom,” Nick noted. The others finally remembered Seron’s absence.

“Maybe he’s got a stomachache?” Larry said, covering for his friend, “We’re practically done anyway, so let him off easy.”

Five minutes passed in bored silence.

“How much longer?!” Natalia complained.

The members waited in the office, and Kenneth waited by the oak tree in the cold.

Not once did Kenneth look back down at his watch. He stood upright, his breath rising in puffs, as he quietly waited for Bridget to arrive.

“Hey, there she is!” Larry cried, discovering their second target. “That’s gotta be SC Bridget. Jenny!”

“Right.”

Jenny began the recording. The reels began to turn with a click.

And sound flowed from the speakers.

The sound of footsteps crunching into the snow grew at a slow crescendo.

Beyond the binoculars, Bridget walked towards the tree, wearing an expensive coat and carrying her bag.

“She’s here!” Natalia mumbled, excited. She was holding a macaron in one hand.

“This will be interesting. Let us keep our ears on their conversation,” said Nick.

Meg glared into her binoculars.

The footsteps suddenly came to a stop.

In the distance, Bridget stopped about three meters from Kenneth.

<Hey Kenneth.>

The first thing to come out of the speakers was a simple greeting.

Bridget’s voice carried across clearly. The tape recorded everything.

And as Meg, Natalia, Larry, Jenny, and Nick listened, Kenneth’s voice emerged from the speakers for the first time.

<The hell do you want, you whore?>

Chapter 8: Bridget

The moment Kenneth's words reached the office, several things happened at once.

"Mph!" Larry cringed as he watched through the viewfinder, pressing the shutter. Then he stuck his hands in his jacket.

Nick chuckled to himself, unable to hide his amusement, but no one noticed.

"Gah!"

Natalia spewed chunks of macaron across the floor.

Jenny simply grinned.

Meg also said nothing, her face locked in a droll expression with her mouth agape.

Thankfully no one was looking in her direction.

<Still as nice as ever,> Bridget replied mechanically, neither angry nor surprised.

Kenneth and Bridget's conversation under the oak tree continued.

<Were you expecting compliments? Would 'slut' have been more to your liking?>

<I'm used to all your insults now.>

<Good for you. At least you aren't sick of them, like I am with your face. Get to the point. Why'd you call me all the way out here?>

<You always ignore me when I try to talk to you inside.>

<Because everyone and their mother knows what a slut you are. If you have even a sliver of guilt somewhere in there, don't talk to me on campus.>

<What the heck did I do to deserve you?>

<That's my line. Our family doesn't sell jewelry cheap enough to go with your third-rate dresses.>

<Don't bring family into this, Kenneth.>

<Shut your hole. If you can't think before you talk, don't even open that mouth of yours.>

<...>

<Oh, are you giving me the silent treatment now? What a joke. Now my fiancée's gone mute.>

<...>

<Say something.>

<What do you want to hear?>

<Shut up, you whore.>

<...>

Inside the office.

"He's just as bad as she is!" Natalia exclaimed.

"Which one do you think we must side with for the greatest merit?" Nick wondered amusedly.

"It cannot be this... It cannot be..." Meg shook her head, looking about ready to burst into tears.

“C’mon, Mr. Hero. It’s about time for you to show up,” Jenny whispered under her breath.

“It’s time,” Larry muttered, taking another photo.

<What a waste of time. I’m outta here,> Kenneth said, turning.

<Wait!>

But a voice stopped him from very far away. Everyone in the office soon heard the sound of footsteps running across the snow.

“Huh?”

Meg’s teary eyes blinked at the familiar voice.

“Whoa!” “Hm?” Natalia and Nick were taken by surprise as well.

As they watched, a figure in a coat approached Kenneth and Bridget.

“Seron!”

Bridget and Kenneth were visibly shocked by Seron’s entrance.

<Good afternoon, SC Kenneth. SC Bridget,> Seron said, positioning himself near the two students so his voice would be captured on the microphones.

“Why is Seron there?!” Meg asked out loud.

“Ah! Shoulda noticed when he took his coat with him!” “He pulled one over us, I see.” Natalia and Nick seemed to feel a mix of defeat and triumph. Meg alone remained oblivious.

“Wh-what will he do?” she wondered, hanging from the windowsill.

“I wonder.” “Wow, it’s Seron.”

Jenny and Larry’s reactions were clearly feigned, but the others were too busy focusing on the conversation by the tree to notice.

<Who’re you?>

<It’s nice to meet you. My name is Seron Maxwell—I’m a fourth-year. How are you?>

<Pleasure. The name’s Kenneth Einsworth, sixth-year. I’m feeling all right. You?>

<Not bad.>

“Pleasantries? Now? What a couple of losers,” Natalia commented.

<I’m having an important conversation with Bridget right now,> said Kenneth in a cold voice, <Could you leave us alone?>

Meg nodded furiously. “Yes! Seron is a side role! Why is he interrupting?!” she cried, though Seron could not possibly hear her, “Someone please, bring Seron back!”

“How?” Natalia asked.

“Even if with sleeping mind powers!”

“Don’t have any of those. You, Nick?”

“I’m afraid I’m not hiding anything else up my sleeve.”

Seron and Kenneth’s conversation continued.

<Oh? What might you have been discussing, SC Kenneth?>

<What are you, deaf? It’s none of your business.>

<I suppose I must be interrupting something.>



That was when Bridget spoke.

<Maybe we should hear him out. It might be important.>

“No, Seron is interrupting!” Meg cried. The conversation continued.

<Don’t bother. I told you to shut your hole, you little bitch,> Kenneth spat, his attitude towards Bridget unchanging.

Larry’s eyes went wide. “You’re incredible, Seron...”

“Seriously...” Jenny mumbled, taking note of the timecode on the recorder.

“What is happening? Is SC Kenneth a bad person? Is Seron confused out of his mind? What is happening?”

In spite of her questions, Meg was the most confused person in the room. And as though in response—

<SC Kenneth,> Seron said, <that’s enough.>

<What’d you say?> Kenneth threatened, turning.

Seron calmly repeated himself.

<That’s enough, SC Kenneth. I don’t think you need to go that far.>

From the silence over the speakers and the gestures beyond the binoculars it was clear that Kenneth’s breath was caught in his throat.

“What?” “Hm?” Natalia and Nick’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oh?” Meg regained some semblance of calm in her surprise.

<What are you talking about?>

<You know exactly what I’m talking about, SC Kenneth.>

<...>

<Please don’t play dumb.>

<...>

<It’s cold out here. What do you say to going inside and continuing the discussion over tea somewhere no one can listen in on you?>

<...Where?> Kenneth finally asked.

<The newspaper club office.>

<You’re coming too, Bridget. We’re going to settle this once and for all.>

Seron strode over the snow. He was followed by Kenneth, who was followed by Bridget. The three students headed to the building housing the office, their footsteps growing distant over the speakers.

“What’s going on here, chief?” Natalia asked, turning.

Rather than respond, Jenny pressed the stop button and began to rewind the tape.

“You don’t seem very surprised by this turn of events, Jenny,” Nick said with a smile.

“Oh wow, I wasn’t expecting this,” Jenny said sarcastically.

“Seron’s right, though,” Larry said, collapsing and putting away the tripod and the camera, “It’ll be better to talk someplace warm.”

“You too, Larry! You and Jenny are up to something!” Natalia accused.

“Sorry,” Larry replied. And he turned.

“Hm? What? Why? How?” Meg was still lost.

“Megmica,” said Larry, “Seron’s going to bring them over now.”

“Pardon? Yes. Yes.”

“So please don’t jump on them even if you get angry. Please.”

“P-pardon? But—”

“It’s okay. Seron’s going to answer any questions you might have, Megmica. He’ll solve everything. So please trust Seron and wait until he finishes. Please.”

Overwhelmed by a mix of expectation, rage, and confusion, Meg remained silent.

The door opened.

Kenneth and Bridget sat side-by-side on one of the sofas. Bridget placed her bag on the empty seat on her right side.

Seron sat across the coffee table from them.

“Take a seat,” Larry urged Meg. She did as he asked and sat next to Seron.

“I’ll be out in a sec.”

Jenny emerged from the darkroom next door and sat in the chair, on the right side from Seron’s perspective.

“We’d better sit back.” “Don’t decide for us, Larry. You’re totally right, though.” “Indeed. Allow me to sit at the very back.”

Larry, Natalia, and Nick also brought chairs over to sit behind Jenny.

Larry brewed more tea to serve the guests. Natalia reluctantly volunteered her macarons.

Nick, left with nothing to do, quietly swept the floor with a broomstick.

When Larry served him tea, Kenneth finally broke his stubborn silence to briefly thank him.

Bridget, on the other hand, smiled as elegantly and proudly as ever.

“I’m so glad I get to savor this tea again.”

She did not even try to hide the fact that she had visited the office in the past.

“What do you mean, ‘again’?” Kenneth inquired, turning. Bridget hid nothing from him.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I’ve been here before. I made a request to the newspaper club.”

“What request?”

“I told them that my fiancé is a piece of trash who is verbally abusing me and that I needed a recording of his abuse to use as leverage in breaking off our engagement. Only the newspaper club is capable of that, with all their experience.”

Kenneth’s handsome face was frozen stiff.

Bridget kept her eyes on him and continued mercilessly and triumphantly.

“Surprised? You were just showering me with insults back there by the tree. That’s right. The newspaper club set up microphones around it and made a recording of the whole thing. That was why I called you out today.”

Kenneth was silent.

“Playing dumb now, are we? Don’t bother. I’m sick of this. I’d rather die than marry you, but I’m not interested in suicide. I am going to live my own life.”

Larry looked at Seron in front of him, and beyond, Meg and her trembling fists.

‘Thank goodness I warned her not to lash out,’ Larry thought, but naturally he did not say a word. That was when someone tapped him on the back.

“Here’s your reward,” Natalia said, stuffing a macaron into his mouth.

“Mmph.”

“I see,” said Kenneth, “So you got me, is that what you want to say?” He looked around at the others.

His gaze met those of the sad pigtailed girl and the boy with the blank face.

“That’s right, you little dog, you,” Bridget said, “Whoops! It looks like someone’s rubbing off on me.”

“Hmph. Ahahahaha!”

Kenneth’s laugh was an unnatural one, almost creepy to behold against his handsome face.

“What’s so funny?”

“What about this is *not* funny, you little whore?”

‘Oh! He’s fighting back!’ Larry thought, chewing on the macaron in his mouth.

When he turned, he spotted a bespectacled girl and a girlish boy waiting with bated breath for the rest of the exchange.

‘Oh man, these two are so messed up,’ he sighed inwardly, but said nothing.

“I know everything, Bridget. I know you’re wagging your tail at every pretty boy you see on campus. You take them out on dates until you get bored and throw them away. You even kiss them in the hallways for everyone to see.”

“So what?”

“Not even trying to deny it, eh? Fine. In fact, now it’s easier for me to settle things. I don’t want to marry you either. Good on you for making that recording—now I don’t have to hold back.”

“Oh? Going to insult me to death like a third-rate lawyer now?”

“No need. Because a picture’s worth a thousand words.”

Kenneth pulled a photograph out of his pocket. And he placed it on the coffee table before Bridget.

The club members recognized the photo at a glance. It was the one Jenny had taken of Bridget kissing Seron.

“What is this?” Bridget howled.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Kenneth said. His question was cold.

Bridget went silent. Kenneth pushed her further.

“Thanks to this photo now I know that you’re at least capable of kissing people—you’ve never kissed me, after all. I could give you the photo if you’d like. To your parents, too, and even the entire staff at Armitage Dresses.”

Bridget did not respond.

“You know who took this photo? Obviously you must’ve figured it out by now. It was Jenny here, president of the newspaper club.”

Bridget still said nothing.

“You’re not the only one who came to the newspaper club. I asked them to get me evidence that you were cheating. And it looks like they completed both our requests perfectly.”

Bridget maintained her silence.

“What’re we waiting for? Just send out all this evidence for the whole world to see. I don’t want to marry you, and you don’t want to marry me. This photo and the recording will convince both our parents.”

It almost sounded as though Kenneth had surrendered completely.

“... Yeah. you’re right,” Bridget finally replied, putting on a bold smile.

“Glad you agree. I can’t wait to start my life over.”

“That’s my line.”

“Tomorrow’s the weekend. You and I will both have to prepare to fight our parents to the death.”

“Hmph.” Bridget snorted and drained her cup of tea in one go. Then, “This tea’s as wonderful as ever. Thanks for all your help, newspaper club. Now please give me the tape.”

Kenneth also smiled. “You’re something else, you know that? Keep up the good work, newspaper club. Dig up more truths for the world to see.” It was hard to tell if he was being serious or sarcastic.

That was when Seron finally broke his silence.

“Please wait.”

Kenneth and Bridget seemed to be just about ready to leave, but Seron’s gaze refused to let them go.

“Please don’t end the conversation yet.”

“Larry, more tea,” Seron said.

“Sure.” Larry got up.

“We’re done here, Seron,” Bridget said, annoyed, “If you want compensation, I can give you as much as you’d like later. A kiss, even.”

Meg seemed to grind her teeth.

“No, SC Bridget. I brought the two of you here to speak to you, but you didn’t give me the chance to say anything. You simply came to a conclusion on your own.”

Kenneth nodded. “That’s true, I suppose. But we’ve come to an agreement. Any more of this will only be a waste of your time. As you can see, we’re both garbage. Feel free to mock us or even publish a paper on this case if that strikes your fancy. If we manage to break up—we *will*, by the way—you’re the first people we’ll come to. Because we’re both very grateful to you,” he said.

Meg’s expression darkened.

Larry served them more tea.

“After we received your requests—” Seron began. Having been completely ignored, Kenneth and Bridget sighed and reached for their cups of tea again. “The newspaper club fell into confusion. You had each asked us to investigate the other in the span of two days. So I began to consider the possibilities.”

Seron paused and raised his right hand, the back of his hand pointed at Kenneth and Bridget. And raising his thumb, he went over the possibilities that Jenny had outlined before.

“The first possibility was that SC Kenneth was lying, and was using SC Bridget as a scapegoat to escape the engagement.”

Then he put up his index finger.

“The second possibility. SC Bridget was lying, and was using SC Kenneth as a scapegoat to escape the engagement.”

Finally, his middle finger.

“Third. Both were telling the truth, hiding their own faults while scapegoating the other to escape the engagement.”

“And now you know the truth,” Kenneth said.

“Lying wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be. It doesn’t matter anymore, though,” Bridget spat as though it were someone else’s business.

Meg cast Seron a sad glance.

That was when Seron put up his ring finger.

Because his pinky was still folded, the ring finger could not be unfolded completely, left to point in a different direction.

“The fourth possibility was,” Seron said, his voice filling the office, “that both were lying.”

In the silent office Seron continued to explain.

“Yes. There was a fourth possibility, that you were both lying,” he said, putting down his hand, “In other words, SC Kenneth falsely claimed that SC Bridget was cheating, while SC Bridget behaved to create such an image of herself. At the same time, SC Bridget falsely claimed that SC Kenneth was verbally abusing her, while SC Kenneth behaved to create such an image of himself.”

For what, the others wondered, silently urging Seron to continue.

“You were working together to break off your engagement. You may not have been cheating or verbally abusing the other, but you didn’t want to marry. Unfortunately, you simply didn’t have the power to overrule your parents, who have been planning this marriage for two decades,” Seron said. “You tried to think of ways to convince them. And eventually you came to a horrifying conclusion. All you had to do was show them that you were not the model son or daughter they thought you were. You could convince your parents that the other party was someone so depraved that they could not possibly marry you to them. It was a sad, socially suicidal tactic.”

No one said a word. Seron continued.

“I don’t know when you came up with this plan. But you agreed to it and put it into motion. And you carried it out with frightening determination. First, SC Bridget began enticing

boys in order to circulate the rumors about herself. She even took them out on dates and kissed them on campus.

“Then it was SC Kenneth’s turn. But unfortunately, the nature of his story meant that he needed someone to testify to his verbal abuse. Which is why you both came to the newspaper club, which was capable of procuring something as expensive as a recorder. You came to us almost at the same time so you could fabricate the photograph too. That your visits were on consecutive days was not a coincidence.”

Seron took a breath and took a sip of tea to wet his dry throat.

“In the end, we at the newspaper club carried out both of your requests. You both got your evidence, and managed to achieve your goal.”

“Th-then...” Meg began, “earlier, the two people’s argument was...”

“An act. They were trying very hard to cover up how happy they were.”

Meg could not continue. Seron turned to the couple.

Kenneth looked away.

Bridget met Seron’s gaze with a glare sharp enough to kill.

“Well?” asked Seron. “Am I wrong?”

Neither Bridget nor Kenneth responded. Natalia spoke instead.

“Hold on. How’d you end up at *that* conclusion? Give us the rundown while our two senior-classmen go look for their missing vocal cords.”

Sensing Meg’s gaze on his left side, Seron turned to Natalia and Nick on his right. “Let’s go back to the 8th. SC Bridget kissed me out of nowhere at the central staircase. At first I was very confused and assumed that she was just a beautiful but strange girl.”

‘That is cold, Seron!’ Larry laughed internally, but he naturally kept silent.

“Then on the 11th, the first day back after the weekend, SC Kenneth came to the club with his request. I wasn’t there, so I heard about it on the next day—the 12th. I knew that SC Bridget was the one who had kissed me, so I almost fell for the claim that she was a cheating fiancée.”

“Understandable,” Natalia remarked.

“There was a specific reason that SC Kenneth came in on the day after a weekend. Because he knew that I—the guy who Bridget kissed—would be away at an RA meeting.”

“Of course,” Nick said with a nod.

“And then SC Bridget came with her request. I’m sorry I have to put it this way, SC Bridget, but I was immediately suspicious that the girl who kissed me out of the blue came asking for evidence of her fiancé’s harassment to use as leverage to break up with him. That was when I began to suspect that you were both lying. And I began to search for answers.”

“That’s pure evil! Expected nothing less from our Seron.”

“Is that a compliment or an insult, Lia? And aren’t *you* the one who said people should be more suspicious?”

“Shaddap.”

“Sure.”

“In other words,” said Nick, “From the very beginning, you were operating on the assumption that both were lying? You should have told us.”

“I couldn’t. I didn’t have proof. But I thought I might find more evidence if I looked into it. And two days later, I had a breakthrough. I invited Larry to my dorm room and got his report. The newspaper club found mountains of testimony about SC Bridget’s infidelity, which struck me as odd. It was too easy.”

“It was too easy?” Meg repeated.

“Yeah. If it was that easy to get so many eyewitness accounts in only two days, it wouldn’t have been so hard to get a photograph of the moment. Which is why I began to wonder why someone known for being so clever would go to the trouble of asking our club to get this evidence.”

Seron continued.

“So I came up with a theory. That SC Bridget was pretending to cheat, hoping to get a photograph taken.”

Nick nodded.

“I decided to contact SC Bridget and meet her after school. I put a letter into her locker and asked her to meet me in a classroom on the fifth floor of the new building, which would be deserted. I was sure she would agree to meet me if she really were intent on creating as much evidence as possible. And that’s exactly what she did.”

“Then Seron, you did these things on purpose!” Meg cried. Seron apologized for no apparent reason and continued.

“I knew that you and Jenny were planning to tail SC Bridget with a camera, Megmica. And I checked that you made it to the girls’ bathroom by the classroom.”

“Seriously? How’d I not notice?” Jenny spat.

Larry glanced at Kenneth and Bridget, who had not said a word for some time.

From their silence it almost seemed as if they were gone, although they remained very much present in the office.

Kenneth had the look of a dead man; on the other hand, Bridget was glaring daggers at Seron with rage apparent on her beautiful face.

A chill ran down Larry’s spine.

“So I went into the classroom. I didn’t have anything in particular to say. All I had to do was act the part of an excited boy who’d come back for more after the last kiss. When Megmica charged in, I got worried for a moment—”

Meg became visibly angry, but Seron continued.

“But as I expected, SC Bridget kissed me in the presence of two cameras, and our top camerawoman captured the moment perfectly. That was when I became convinced that SC Bridget was only pretending to cheat.”

Natalia and Nick nodded in understanding.

“Then it was time to think about SC Kenneth. I couldn’t completely set aside the possibility that SC Kenneth was verbally abusing his fiancée. But yesterday Megmica gave me the evidence I needed.”

“Pardon? Evidence from me?”

“Yeah. You got angry at me and said that I kissed SC Bridget twice.”

“Oh, of course I did say this. But...it is truth, yes?”

“It is. By coincidence you spotted the kiss on the central staircase from the empty hallway.”

“I did!”

“The rest of the club was floored when they heard, because they had no idea I was the boy SC Kenneth had claimed to see kissing Bridget on the 8th.”

“Yes!”

“Then we have to think—from where did SC Kenneth witness the moment?” Seron asked. Natalia was quick to answer.

“We talked ‘bout this yesterday. You can’t see from the stairs so he must’ve seen you from the grounds.”

But Seron shook his head. “He couldn’t have. Not in that snowfall.”

“Now that you mention it, we had a big snowstorm then. Man, with all this crazy weather I can barely remember what happened when,” Natalia groaned.

“Indeed. It does seem quite unlikely,” Nick agreed.

“Hm? Then what is the thing that SC Kenneth saw?” Meg wondered. Seron had her answer.

“He didn’t see a thing.”

“What?”

“SC Kenneth didn’t see SC Bridget kiss me on the 8th. He couldn’t have.”

“Then how did he know this?”

“SC Bridget must have told him that she kissed a fourth-year named Seron Maxwell at the central staircase on the 8th.”

Meg was silent.

“They probably hadn’t expected another witness to the scene. So SC Kenneth gave us the objective facts when he came to us with the request, without taking perspective into account.”

Though Seron could easily turn to the two senior-classmen for confirmation, he did not. He simply continued to explain his thought processes for Meg and the club members.

“Once I realized that they were in cahoots, I managed to solidify my theory. Then came today—the day we would record evidence of SC Kenneth’s verbal abuse.”

Seron looked at Meg, Natalia, and Nick in order.

“I’m really sorry I didn’t let you know sooner. I told Larry and Jenny everything at lunchtime. And I told them that I would intervene once SC Kenneth and SC Bridget’s conversation began.”

“I knew it!” Natalia exclaimed.

“I was sure that SC Kenneth would come out with guns blazing, acting like he was abusing SC Bridget. They needed that recording, after all. That and the photograph. I considered the possibility that SC Kenneth wouldn’t say anything incriminating, but—”

“That’s exactly what he did,” Larry continued, taking out his flashlight and flicking it on and off.

“I told Larry ahead of time to signal me once SC Kenneth’s abuse began. I was watching the whole thing with a pair of binoculars from the building across the way.”

“What?! Larry, you sneak!” “Impressive,” Natalia and Nick remarked, both smiling.

“My plan was to approach them and bring them both to the office. That was when SC Kenneth slipped up. He verbally abused SC Bridget in my presence. —Jenny?”

Jenny got up and went to the recorder. She rewound the tape to the timecode she had noted down and pressed play.

Kenneth’s voice filled the room.

<Don’t bother. I told you to shut your hole, you little bitch—>

Jenny stopped the recording and took a seat again. She did not look pleased.

“That all you get to do today, chief?” Natalia teased.

“Not another word, Natalia.”

“Sure, sure.”

Seron, the man of the hour, continued.

“As we clarified when SC Bridget first came to us with her request, a verbal abuser doesn’t carry out the abuse when a third party is present. In public, they try to act the part of a good person. That’s the scary thing about it—no one will believe the victim’s claims. Which was why it was strange to hear SC Kenneth say something so harsh to SC Bridget when I was standing right there. It was the last piece of evidence I needed.”

The unhappily engaged couple said absolutely nothing. Seron continued.

“Well, SC Kenneth? SC Bridget? Am I wrong?”

Seron’s question was the same as the one from earlier. But this time he got a response.

“What will you do if you turn out to be right?”

It was Kenneth. He was looking sadly at Seron.

“In that case,” Seron replied, “I would humbly advise you to put a stop to this terrible plan.” He looked directly at the senior-classmen before him. “I understand clearly that the two of you wish to end your engagement. And that you would do anything to achieve your goal. But as I said earlier, this is suicide. I don’t want to simply let you go through with this. I’m sure your parents will believe your claims if you show them the evidence we collected. But it will cause them incredible grief, and news of your dishonorably broken engagement will spread no matter how much they want to sweep it under the rug. Your reputations will be dragged through the mud.”

Kenneth was silent.

“Ha ha ha!”

But Bridget laughed. She laughed so very elegantly.

Holding her head high, she said without a moment’s hesitation,

“I don’t care.”

Chapter 9: Even now, I feel the same

“Th-then...” Meg stammered, the realization dawning on her, “these...things you two did... Seron was all correct?”

“That’s right, pigtails.”

Bridget did not waste a second in giving her an answer. Seron and the others could hear Meg gasp.

“Not one nasty detail out of place. And digging up all these secrets we’ve been so desperately trying to hide—you’re all disgusting. Seron, and all of you in this club.”

“Aww, thanks,” Natalia replied.

“That’s not a compliment, Lia!”

“Larry, don’t butt in. We’re having a moment here.”

Larry could not respond.

“That’s a good boy,” Natalia cooed.

Seron also was silent. He did not seem happy at all about being proven correct.

“If, as president, I may be frank,” Jenny said, “we’re not exactly happy that you lied to us and used us for your suicidal plot. So please don’t blame us for just doing our job.”

One of the two sixth-years replied,

“Looks like all of you need to learn some tact. Especially you, Seron.”

“Th-that is not true! For you, Seron did all these things!” Meg retorted.

“For us?”

However, all she got in exchange was an icy glare.

“If he wanted to do anything for us, he should have let us carry out our plans in peace.”

“But it will be messy for your future!” Meg tried to argue. But Bridget showed no mercy.

“I told you, I don’t care. Stop sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong, pigtails.”

“Why...?”

“You don’t know anything.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said you don’t know anything. I’m not surprised. How *could* you know anything? How would you know how sad and painful it is to have been engaged to someone since before you were born? Tell me, pigtails. What’s your favorite food?”

“Pardon?”

“Your favorite food. Don’t tell me you don’t have one.”

“I-I do have my favorite foods. In Roxche and Sou Be-Il, I love cheese dishes.”

“You’re not allowed to have any cheese. For the rest of your life.”

“Pardon?”

“What else do you like?”

“Chocolate cake...”

“You can’t have that anymore, either.”

“...”

“And I bet you like chicken noodle soup. But that’s off-limits forever too.”

“...”

Slowly, Meg's expression changed from confusion to one of utter horror as the implications dawned on her.

"You finally get it. That's how I grew up. My parents always said I was only allowed to have one food for the rest of my life. The food that they had decided for me."

"..."

"They told me every single day of my life. That I didn't have a choice. That I couldn't choose the person I would love and spend the rest of my life with. They said all that with a smile. They said it was all for my sake."

"That is...painful, I think..." Meg whispered, finally understanding.

"Of course. Although 'painful' doesn't even begin to describe it," Bridget said with a snort. "Seron called our plan suicidal. And he's right. We're putting our lives on the line. But don't worry, we're not really killing ourselves. Better to be shamed in public than to die. I considered just offing myself to make a point to my parents, but I decided that I wanted to live." Bridget pushed back her long hair with an elegant motion. "So now you all know. Both Kenneth and I have been struggling for years. You said you were worried about us? Don't make me laugh. I don't need your pity. All I need is that evidence you've collected for us. Give me the tape and forget all this ever happened. That will solve everything."

No one from the newspaper club responded. Bridget's voice alone filled the quiet room.

"What's wrong? You found the truth. Your job's done. Or were you planning to tell our parents about all this to 'rescue' us? Sure, that might make them happy. No one would lose face. But remember, that's no different from killing us."

Bridget picked up her teacup, pausing briefly. That was when Seron finally spoke.

"We want neither of those outcomes. I want to help you."

"Pfft!" Bridget almost spilled her tea. She put down her cup. "Please, Seron, I almost stained my uniform."

"Uniforms can be washed, but you can't cleanse a stained reputation."

"This is none of your business. You already know what we want—the plan you called suicidal."

"Are you sure about that?"

"What?"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely certain that both of you want things to come to such a tragic end?"

"Oh, now you're going to resort to tears? This is ridiculous," Bridget said, turning. "Let's grab the tape and go, Kenneth. We can't waste time and energy here—he has work to do."

Kenneth met Bridget's gaze. He took a deep breath.

"Let's stop this."

"What?"

"We should stop this."

Seron breathed a long sigh of relief. But only Meg noticed.

She turned. Seron noticed her gaze and locked eyes with her. For a split second his grey eyes looked gently into hers.

"We should stop this plan, Bridget. I can't take it anymore..."

Though Bridget understood the meaning of his words, she did not understand Kenneth's intent.

"What are you talking about? We can't back out now. Are you too scared to face your parents?"

"No...I'm not."

"Then are you scared of your reputation being destroyed? Is that it?"

"No, I've never minded losing face. Even now, I feel the same. I'm willing to go up against my parents and fight as dirty as I can."

"Then explain to me why you want to stop."

"I...I can't let *your* reputation be destroyed, Bridget..."

"...Are you joking?"

"No."

"Did you hit your head, Kenneth? Newspaper club, did you poison his tea?" Bridget accused, but no one replied.

However, Seron addressed Kenneth directly.

"Why didn't you take the photos yourself?"

"What?"

Bridget raised an eyebrow.

Kenneth grimaced.

"The photos to use as evidence against SC Bridget," Seron explained, "There is nothing suspicious about coming to the newspaper club for help with photography, as the club—I mean, Jenny—has experience taking photos in secret. But setting the recording aside, photographing SC Bridget kissing other boys should have been easy because you were in cahoots. That's not all. I've been told that you are a hobbyist photographer yourself, SC Kenneth."

"To get evidence on their own selves...now that I think, that sounds to be right," Meg said with a nod.

"It would have been simpler if SC Kenneth had taken the photos and SC Bridget came to the club with her request alone. And yet both of you came to us. That created the chance that the club might only fulfill one request, deeming one person more useful than the other. It's a minor risk, but a risk nonetheless."

"What does that matter? Either way, we ended up at the same place," Bridget spat, uninterested.

"That's right, you probably haven't thought too much about it, SC Bridget," said Seron. "I'm guessing that SC Kenneth was the one who came up with this plan. Am I wrong?"

"So what?" Bridget did not understand Seron's line of questioning.

"SC Bridget," Seron said, "SC Kenneth just couldn't bring himself to take those photos. He didn't want to see you kissing someone else. That's why his plan involved the both of you coming to us."

"What?"

"You can't take a photograph without being there in person. In other words, SC Kenneth couldn't take a photo of you cheating on him unless he watched you kiss someone else. He couldn't bear it."

"Ah! Aaaaah!" Meg exclaimed.

Bridget flinched.

“Yes! I understand! Oh my goodness!” Meg cried, eyes turning to dinner plates. “Oh, I cannot believe it!”

Everyone but Seron and Kenneth reacted with looks of confusion.

“I understand Seron’s words now! Yes! SC Kenneth never wanted to see SC Bridget kiss someone! He did not want to see with his eyes! Because—”

Seron did not stop Meg.

“Because! SC Kenneth is in love with SC Bridget! He loves SC Bridget with the whole of his heart!”

“Whoa!” “My, my!” Natalia and Nick exclaimed.

And Jenny and Larry—whom Seron had spoken to earlier—nodded, impressed that Meg managed to reach the answer.

“What’s this now?” Bridget uttered, incredulous. “Kenneth, what are they talking about?” Kenneth slowly turned.

“...They’re right.”

“What?”

“I said they’re right, Bridget. I love you. More than anyone else.”

“What?”

“I’ve loved you for a long time. I’ve never hated you at all, although I never told you.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“Then why were you helping me?”

Though the question was directed at Kenneth, Meg responded for him.

“It is an obvious answer! SC Kenneth wants your happiness, SC Bridget! He wants the happiness of the person he loves! Even if he is not the person to be beside her for always!”

“You said something earlier, SC Bridget,” Seron said coolly, “That if we wanted to do something for you, we should have let you carry out your plans in peace. That’s exactly what SC Kenneth has been doing. He wasn’t acting for both of you—he was doing all this for you alone. He did everything he could to help because you wanted to break off your engagement at all costs. Without any regard for himself.”

Seron shot Bridget a glare.

“But remember what SC Kenneth said before. He wanted to stop this plan. He didn’t want you to be dragged through the mud. Even now, he’s only thinking of you, SC Bridget. He wants you to be happy. So please stop this. Think of another way.”

“Yes! You do not really have to use these ways!”

Bridget looked at Kenneth.

And with a gentle smile, she asked him a question.

“Kenneth. I tried to run away from you. But you cooperated with me because you loved me?”

“Yes.”

“You could have married me if you’d just sat back and waited.”

“But then you wouldn’t be happy, Bridget. There’s no point in marriage if the person you love isn’t happy.”

“You’ve never told me that you loved me. Didn’t it ever occur to you to confess?”

“I thought that would be like betraying you.”

“Heh. One last question. What are you going to do now? What do you want, now that everything’s out in the open?”

“Your happiness.”

“Specifically?”

“I’m going to do everything I can to break off this engagement. I’ll find a different way, one that won’t hurt you. I already know you’re never going to return my feelings.”

“I see... Sweet and considerate to the end, Kenneth.”

Bridget’s right hand quietly moved.

Away from Kenneth, to the bag on her right.

“Kenneth. Seron. Pigtails. And everyone from our esteemed newspaper club. Do you know what I hate the most?”

No one could answer her sudden question.

“Let me tell you. I resolved to do absolutely anything and everything to escape this position. I did all of this because—”

Her hand went into her bag. And took hold of something that was always inside.

“—I hate it when people make my decisions *for* me!”

Bridget’s scream seemed to have risen from the depths of hell.

She drew her right hand out of the bag, pushing the sewing scissors in her grip into the side of the boy beside her.

“No!”

Though he heard Meg scream, Kenneth could not react in time.

“Grk!”

His fiancée, out of the blue, stabbed him.

The glinting scissors tore through his jacket, shirt, and skin.

When Bridget pulled them out again, several centimeters of the blades were covered in blood.

“I should have done this from the start,” she remarked dryly.

There was no joy or madness in her face. No emotions. Nothing but simple calm.

Kenneth slowly fell over the left side of the sofa. A red stain slowly spread over the right side of his jacket.

Bridget turned her sights on Meg.

“Ah!”

“I hate you too, pigtails.”

Meg’s line of sight was filled with Bridget, slowly climbing over the table with the bloody scissors in her hand.

Followed by Seron’s back.



Bridget put all her weight into her scissors as they pierced Seron right in the stomach. But the moment the tips of the blades sunk into him, Seron grabbed Bridget's arm. With his arms and his own body, Seron stopped her attack.

"Dammit!" Larry cried, clambering forward. But he was beaten to the punch.

"Hah!"

Nick swung the end of his broomstick, striking Bridget in the temple.

"Ah..."

Concussed, Bridget slowly began to fall. Nick held out the broomstick to change the direction of her fall to the sofa.

Only Seron was left standing. A pair of scissors stuck out of his stomach.

"This really hurts, but I'm sure the adrenaline is making it feel less painful than it actually is..." he analyzed mechanically.

* * *

<Hold on a minute, SC Jenny. I'm really sorry, but...>

<Yeah?>

<About what you just said. You make it sound as if SC Kenneth and SC Seron were stabbed inside the office.>

<They were.>

<Oh, that's some kind of a metaphor, right?>

<Nope. I mean it in the literal sense. Two people were stabbed. Blood spilling out. The whole works.>

<Wh-wha...>

<Hm?>

<What happened?! Is SC Seron all right? Was he badly hurt?>

<I'm not reporting to make you worry, newbie. So lemme calm you down first.>

<R-right!>

<Seron wasn't in good shape, but the wound wasn't serious either. The scissors pierced through skin and muscle but not any organs, thankfully. He might have a scar from the surgery for a while, but otherwise he just got stuck in the hospital for a bit.>

<Thank goodness!>

<He did good out there. If Seron hadn't stepped in, Megmica might not be with us anymore.>

<R-right! What a relief...>

<Moving on to SC Kenneth. He was a little worse off than Seron, but there was no organ damage and it wasn't even close to being a mortal wound.>

<Thank goodness... I thought my heart was about to stop.>

<That's good. It'd be hard to explain two injuries in the office and one heart attack halfway across the continent.>

<Yeah. But wasn't it a big problem? They didn't shut down the club, did they?>

<Thanks for your concern, but we're all right.>

<Really?>

<Yep. The stabbing never happened.>

<H-how?!>

<Lemme just go over what happened right after SC Bridget's outburst. The first thing we did was first aid.>

<Of course!>

<Larry's military training came in really handy, since he knew a lot of treatment techniques. He checked the depths of the wounds before laying them both down on the sofas and stopping the bleeding with handkerchiefs. Both SC Kenneth and Seron were in pain, but conscious. Nick tied up SC Bridget while she was still dazed. Looked like he was having a lot of fun.>

<A-and then?>

<We had a car take the patients to a hospital I have contacts at. My bodyguards were nearby so it didn't take long—it was faster than calling an ambulance. We went out the back door to avoid being spotted. Larry and Natalia went along to the hospital, but Megmica was still out of it, so I promised to contact her later and forced her to go home.>

<I see. But more importantly...>

<The problem was explaining the situation to the staff.>

<Yeah. How did you do it?>

<We called in our supervisor around sunset.>

<The club has a supervisor?>

<What club doesn't? Our supervisor's a teacher named Mark Murdoch. Do you know him?>

<Y-yes! I really owe him a lot!>

<Really? Anyway, we forced him to come to the office and—>

<Did you lie to him? Maybe tell him that the senior-classmen tripped and fell?>

<No. I mean, ultimately that's what the records will say, but I didn't lie to Mr. Murdoch. I let him hear the recording.>

<What?>

<I was recording the whole conversation in the office. It was Seron's idea.>

<H-how?>

<I brought in another recorder—my dad's—and set it up in the darkroom. I put the microphone behind the sofa the sixth-years were sitting on.>

<I-I remember now! You said earlier that you were using your uncle's recorder for the conversation under the tree!>

<That's right. You've got a great memory, newbie.>

<In other words, you had a recording of the entire situation?>

<Yep. And I let Mr. Murdoch listen to it. Afterwards he said, 'Hmph. It's a good thing things ended as well as they did! Clumsy oafs, Einsworth and Maxwell both. Reaching for the same pair of scissors on a shelf and tripping over at the same time? Tell them to be more careful'.>

<...>

<So Mr. Murdoch got really angry and went to the faculty office to report the accident. Supervisors are obligated to report any student injuries.>

<Er...SC Jenny?>

<Hm?>

<Do you by any chance have blackmail material on Mr. Murdoch?>

<I guess you could say that.>

<...>

<Anyway, we managed to cover up the incident. It does bug me that the club had to hide something like this from the public, but what can you do.>

<If you hadn't concealed the truth, SC Kenneth's feelings...his determination...it would all have been for nothing.>

<Right. We didn't need to raise a fuss over it, especially since our victims didn't want to.>

<Both of them, I see. SC Seron must have felt a connection with SC Kenneth, since he was hiding his feelings for SC Megmica too.>

<Putting their lives on the line for girls they can't even confess to...what a couple of idiots.>

<Er...what happened to SC Bridget?>

<We took away the scissors and dumped her in the car that came to pick her up. Apparently SC Kenneth talked to her on the phone later on. Dunno what about, but he told me not to worry. That he'd manage somehow.>

<Do you really think he will?>

<Who knows?>

<Is that all you have to say, SC Jenny?>

<Now that he's drawn the line, the newspaper club's not going to get involved anymore. We might step in if he asks for help, though.>

<Did SC Bridget come back to school afterwards?>

<No. But I haven't heard anything about her dropping out, either.>

<I see...>

<Even I don't know if they'll manage to break up in the end or if SC Bridget will come around to return SC Kenneth's feelings. Their battle's only just begun.>

<Wow...it all sounds like a radio drama that was canceled halfway through the story.>

<So that's about all I have to report.>

<That really was something big.>

<Huh? Oh, wait. Right, I still haven't told you about the big thing that happened.>

<You mean that wasn't it, SC Jenny?>

<Nope.>

<P-please tell me!>

<Oh, I think someone's coming.>

<Please, SC Jenny! You have to tell me!>

<All right, all right. It was a couple of days later...>

Chapter 10: The Fiancée out of the Blue

The 18th day of the second month.

It had been two days since the so-called accident in the office. It was a weekend.

The sky had been clear all day. It was 1 in the afternoon, the sun shining down upon the world.

Strauski Megmica looked up at the hospital.

The general hospital was the largest in the Capital District, its doctors famed for their skill. Multiple wards towered over the ground.

Meg was in her uniform. Though she was dressed for class, she held in her hands not a bag but a bouquet of flowers.

Eyes brimming with tears, Meg slowly began to walk again, her pigtails swishing.

She stepped in through the main doors and headed to the reception desk to check in.

She filled in a form and received a visitor's pass and a room number.

And soon Meg stood before a hospital room labeled with the name 'Maxwell'.

For four minutes she simply stood before the door.

Without warning, the door opened.

"Whoa."

The previous visitor was surprised to see Meg.

It was Larry, wearing jeans and a sweater and holding a leather jacket under his arm. He slowly shut the door and came out into the hall.

"Hey there, Megmica," he whispered.

"Good afternoon, Larry. Er..."

Meg could not continue. Larry looked her in the eye.

"Yeah. It's all right now," he said. Meg was shocked.

"Are you certain of this? Can you know?"

"Yeah," Larry said firmly. "Anyway, I gotta get going. Seron's been knocked out with painkillers for a bit, but you should stay with him in case something happens, Megmica. Watch over him until he wakes up, all right? Thanks!"

"Huh? Er, I—"

Before Meg could properly respond, Larry waved and departed down the hall.

Twenty steps later, he looked back.

"Please..."

Meg was no longer in the hallway.

When Larry went down to the lobby, he spotted a familiar face sitting on a bench.

"Hey there!"

"Hi Larry," Jenny replied glumly. Larry took a seat on her right.

Jenny was wearing long pants and a rough winter jacket. She was dressed almost as casually as Larry was.

"You're here too, eh? Might want to wait a bit if you want to see Seron."

"I know. Why else would I be sitting around in the lobby?" Jenny shot back. Larry thought for a moment and gave her a thumbs-up.

"I get it! You saw Megmica too. So you got the hint and decided to wait here. That's our president for you."

Jenny glared. "Megmica's gone to his room, right?"

"Yep. More like I pushed her in there, asking her to look after Seron."

"Hmph. Not bad. For you, anyway," Jenny replied, taciturn.

"There's nothing to worry about now."

"What d'you mean?"

"They'll be fine. You don't need to worry about them."

This time, it was Jenny's turn to think.

She looked into Larry's profiled face—his bright blue eyes—and thought. And reached an answer.

"Ah, that thing you said about the eyes," Jenny said with a nod, remembering how Larry had seen through Stella in an instant.

"More or less, yeah."

Larry slightly held up his left hand. The wristwatch from the star was on his wrist.

He checked the time—

"Huh?"

And noticed Jenny's gaze on him. He turned.

She was staring. Unamused, but not bored.

"What is it?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing. It looks like I'm still all right."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're too stupid to understand."

"What."

"You wouldn't understand even if you were smart, either."

"Huh?"

"No one in the world can really know how other people feel."

"Sure, even an idiot like me knows that much."

"Ha ha! That's true."

"Whoa! That's unusual."

"What is?"

"You putting on such a bright smile. You looked just like that photo from three years ago."

Jenny was caught off-guard for a moment, but she soon smiled. This time, the smile was that of a hunter locked on to a new scoop.

"Say, Larry."

"Yeah?"

"Suppose Seron and Megmica go to the dance together."

"Hm? Oh right, it's still more than a month away. Seron'll make it out of the hospital in time."

"Aren't you curious?"

“About what?”

“Don’t you want to see how they’ll look as they dance in front of half the school?”

“Heck yeah!”

“Right? And wouldn’t you want to take photos of it all too?”

“Yeah!”

“Perfect. Then as president, I’m granting you special permission!”

“Permission for what?”

“Do I really have to spell it out for you? You’re really dense, you know that?”

“Yes, I know that. So please spell it out for me?”

“What I’m trying to say is…”

“Yeah?”

“...Do you know how to dance, Larry?”

* * *

Seron was asleep.

He lay in a luxurious bed in a luxurious private room, bathed in the soft sunlight that filtered through the curtains.

Meg sat in a chair beside the bed, watching his face. Once she had put the flowers she brought in a vase, she had been left with nothing else to do.

This time, she did not fall asleep.

She watched Seron’s sleeping face, her gaze never wavering.

The minute hand on the clock had done nearly a 360 when a voice broke the silence.

“Mr. Maxwell?”

A nurse quietly stepped inside. She gave Meg a brief nod when the latter turned.

“How is he? Not out of sorts at all?” asked the nurse.

“Yes, he is feeling well, I think,” Meg replied.

“Then I’ll be back in an hour,” the nurse said, departing.

Meg watched the door until it closed and turned back to Seron.

“Ah!”

Their eyes met.

“Er...I...erm...”

Meg was lost for words.

“What a strange dream.” Seron, meanwhile, was calm. “Larry’s turned into Megmica.”

“I-it is not a dream!”

“Whoa!” Seron flinched, cringing when his injury ached.

“Oh, I am very sorry...I am sorry that I spoke in a loud voice. I will speak in a normal voice...”

Meg briefly explained how she had switched with Larry and that she was here to visit.

“I see... Thank you for the flowers,” Seron said, finally calm.

Meg, however, was not. She took an angry breath.

Gritting her molars and baring her teeth, she glared.

“What was it that you did?!” she demanded in as loud a voice as she could use in the hospital.

“Huh? Wha...?” Seron blinked.

“Why did you do something that was so risky?! Why?! Jumping to a person who was carrying a weapon!”

“...Oh. Right.”

“Do you really say, ‘oh right’ in a time like this, Seron? You may have almost died! It was dangerous!”

“No, really. It wasn’t that serious. It’ll only take two weeks to heal—”

“That is not the problem!”

Tears began to fall from Meg’s eyes.

“Er...Miss Strauski Megmica, please listen to me,” Seron said in response, “There’s something I would like to tell you,” he said quietly and politely.

Meg wiped away her tears and snapped, “Please say it!”

“Thank you. You see, I’m glad things turned out this way. I really am.”

“Why?”

“Because the violence stopped here, when it could have been so much worse. Someone could have died.”

“But!”

“If you’d been stabbed, Megmica...and if you’d died...that wouldn’t have been the end. I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself—I might have killed myself to follow after you.”

“Wh-what?! Killing yourself to follow me? That is too scary, Seron, please do not say it!”

“I would choose to follow the one I love to the depths of hell.”

“What—”

Meg paused.

Memories of the previous summer flashed by. The beautiful forests and flowers of Ercho Village. And her own words, spoken on the balcony with the beautiful view.

The next thing she heard was in Bezelese.

It was slow, awkward, and badly pronounced—

“I, love you. More than, anyone else.”

But it was a clear and resolute confession.

“Then—!”

Meg responded in a furious flurry of Bezelese. The only thing Seron understood properly was the first word.

“_____ no _____! _____, _____, _____! My _____, _____!”

He froze for a moment at the barrage, but managed to respond.

“Please, speak slowly. I do not, understand.”

Meg smiled and responded to Seron slowly, with a very gentle voice.

“I also love you very much.”

“I understand, those words. Please, go out with me,” Seron replied.

Meg gave a nod.



Meg remained in the chair and Seron lay in his bed.

They continued to talk, looking into each other's eyes.

"Now, I will speak in Roxchean again, Seron."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Please! Now even at graduation if my family returns to Sou Be-Il, I must live in Roxche!"

"Hm?"

"Because I will be a Roxchean person!"

"Huh?"

"But I cannot forgive a little for kissing that person. I do not want to see the person I love kiss someone. But I will never let this happen again! It is my goal as a new Roxchean person."

"Wha...?"

"No, I will not let this happen! Because my eyes are wide open!"

"Oh, er...right." Seron nodded, still lost. Then—

"Seron!" "Seron!"

The door flew open and two women rushed into the room.

"Ah!"

Surprised, Meg leapt to her feet and offered her chair to them.

One of the two visitors was a woman in her early forties wearing an impeccable red suit.

"Oh! You're not as pale as I expected, sweetie! You're practically blushing!"

She got down beside Seron's bed and began to shower him with kisses all over his cheeks and forehead, and sometimes his lips.

"Huh?"

As Meg watched in confusion, the other visitor—a short black-haired girl in a light red cardigan and a blue skirt—clung to the other side of the bed.

"What happened, Seron? We were so worried about you!"

She mussed his hair with a tiny hand and gave him a gentle kiss on the forehead.

"Wha?"

They completely ignored Meg as they continued to fuss over Seron.

"They said it wasn't too deep, right? Can you eat, honey?"

"We brought cake!"

"Do you know if we're allowed to sleep over tonight?"

"And juice!"

Meg stared in a daze as the visitors fretted over Seron.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry! I knew you were there, but for some reason I assumed you were a nurse! I'm so sorry."

Seron's mother Karen Maxwell finally greeted Meg and introduced herself.

"And this here is Seron's sister Leena. She's 12 years old."

"Hello," Leena said with a curtsy.

"It is nice to meet you. My name is Strauski Megmica. I am a student at Seron's school and do club activities together with Seron," Meg said with a deep bow.

"Oh my, you're very polite. If I may ask, are you from cross-river?" asked Karen.

“Yes!” Meg replied.

Then—

“Seron and I have just pledged our future together. I am still lacking, but please take care of me!”

Many things happened at once.

First, Seron’s eyes turned to dinner plates.

“Huh?”

He tried to pull himself up, but the wound on his stomach put a painful end to his attempt.

“Ow.”

“Oh my! How lovely!” Karen exclaimed, almost loud enough to disturb the other patients. She took Meg’s hands in her own. “So you’re going to become Seron’s bride someday! It’s so nice to meet you, Megmica. Please, do take care of Seron!”

“Yes, Mother!”

Leena ran over from the other side of the bed. “Wow, Seron! I can’t believe you’re gonna marry such a pretty girl! So this is Megmica,” Leena exclaimed, “Megmica, are you by any chance older than Seron?”

“Oh, yes. I am the one year older.”

“Wow! I knew it! An older girl who’s not from Roxche! I must be psychic!”

“You are very cute, Leena. Just like a doll. I am very happy because I do not have any younger sisters!”

“Yay!” Leena cheered, hugging Meg.

“Yes!” Meg nodded, patting Leena’s head.

“This is wonderful! I was so worried on the way here, Seron, imagining my poor baby in pain on a hospital bed, but you gave me such a lovely surprise!”

“Mom, let’s have a party today! Let’s go get crisps together!” Leena begged.

“Of course! Do you like Capital District crisps, Megmica?”

“Yes! I love them very much!”

“Then it’s decided!”

“Yay! Megmica, can I call you Big Sis?”

“Of course you may!”

Seron watched the women chatter excitedly in the middle of the room.

Left to his own devices in his bed, he managed to squeeze out a voice in spite of his aching wound.

“Er...what’s this about...marriage...?”

“Where do you live, Megmica?”

“I live with my family on Rue Trente Street in the Western District.”

“It’s a lovely neighborhood, from what I remember.”

“Wait...” Seron gasped, “listen to me—”

“Megmica! You have a brother, right? His name’s Kurt, right?”

“Oh my, how do you know this?”

“Hee hee! Actually, I talk with him on the phone a lot!”

“I see! I did not know that. It is wonderful!”
“Er...everyone?” Seron asked feebly.
“Can I please meet him sometime?”
“Of course you can meet him. I will introduce you while you are at the Capital District.”
“Er...I don’t even know anymore,” Seron sighed, looking up at the ceiling in surrender.
“That’s right. I’m dreaming right now. When I open my eyes, I’ll see Larry. And he’ll say,
‘Seron, you were grinning in your sleep’.”
He closed his eyes. The painkillers were luring him back into sleep. But—
“Seron!”
He opened his eyes to find his mother’s face only a hand’s breadth from his own.
“Whoa! Yes, Mother?”
“What should I do for the engagement gift? What do you want to get your future wife to
remember today by?”
“...I don’t care if this is a dream anymore...”
“Speak up, honey. There must be something you’ve wanted to get for her.”
“Yeah...”
“Yes?”
Seron slowly closed his eyes as he replied,
“A Whitfield wristwatch...”

* * *

<Er...SC Jenny?>
<Yeah, newbie?>
<Let me just confirm something. This wasn’t all just some dream SC Seron was having?
Not a hallucination from his painkillers?>
<No.>
<...Could you just confirm that with me one more time?>
<It wasn’t a dream.>
<Then they really—>
<Like I just told you. Megmica became Seron’s fiancée out of the blue. They’re
engaged.>
<...>
<So that about covers the update. Megmica and Seron might have a few hiccups here and
there, but they like each other a lot and they’re really lucky, so I was pretty sure it would work
out. And it did. Thanks for listening, newbie. You must be tired.>
<...>
<See? Was that big or what?>

Finale: Endings and Beginnings

The 13th day of the fourth month, the year 3306 of the World Calendar.

In the middle of the school gymnasium, which had been converted into a ballroom,
A boy and a girl were dancing.

A boy with black hair,
And a girl with long, decorated brown hair.

The boy, in a black tuxedo,
And the girl, in a yellow dress.

With the gazes of many other boys and girls on them, they danced.
Elegantly, and maybe a little violently.

“You’re even good at dancing, huh. I hate you a little bit more now, Treize.”
“Cut me some slack, Lillia. I’m trying my best here.”
“Tch. You know, I won’t go easy on you even if you’re a prince or whatever.”
“I know.”

The words they exchanged as they danced,
Were drowned out completely by the music around them.

“I am wondering what the two people are talking about... But in any case, they are both
very, very cool.”

A girl with long black hair done up—
A girl wearing a white dress—
Said to the boy standing at her right side.

“It sort of looks like they’re fighting.”
A boy with grey eyes—
A boy wearing a black tuxedo—
Replied with a flustered look.

The emcee on the dance floor said, “everyone, are you just going to stand around all
night?”

Boys and girls stepped onto the floor with their chosen partners beside them.

The black-haired girl turned her gaze from Lillia and Treize, looking to her right.
And she held out her white-gloved hand to the boy standing there.

The grey-eyed boy turned elegantly,

And gently took her hand in his.

“Shall we dance, Seron Maxwell?”

The girl asked in Bezelese.

“It would be my pleasure, Meg.”

The boy replied in Roxchean.

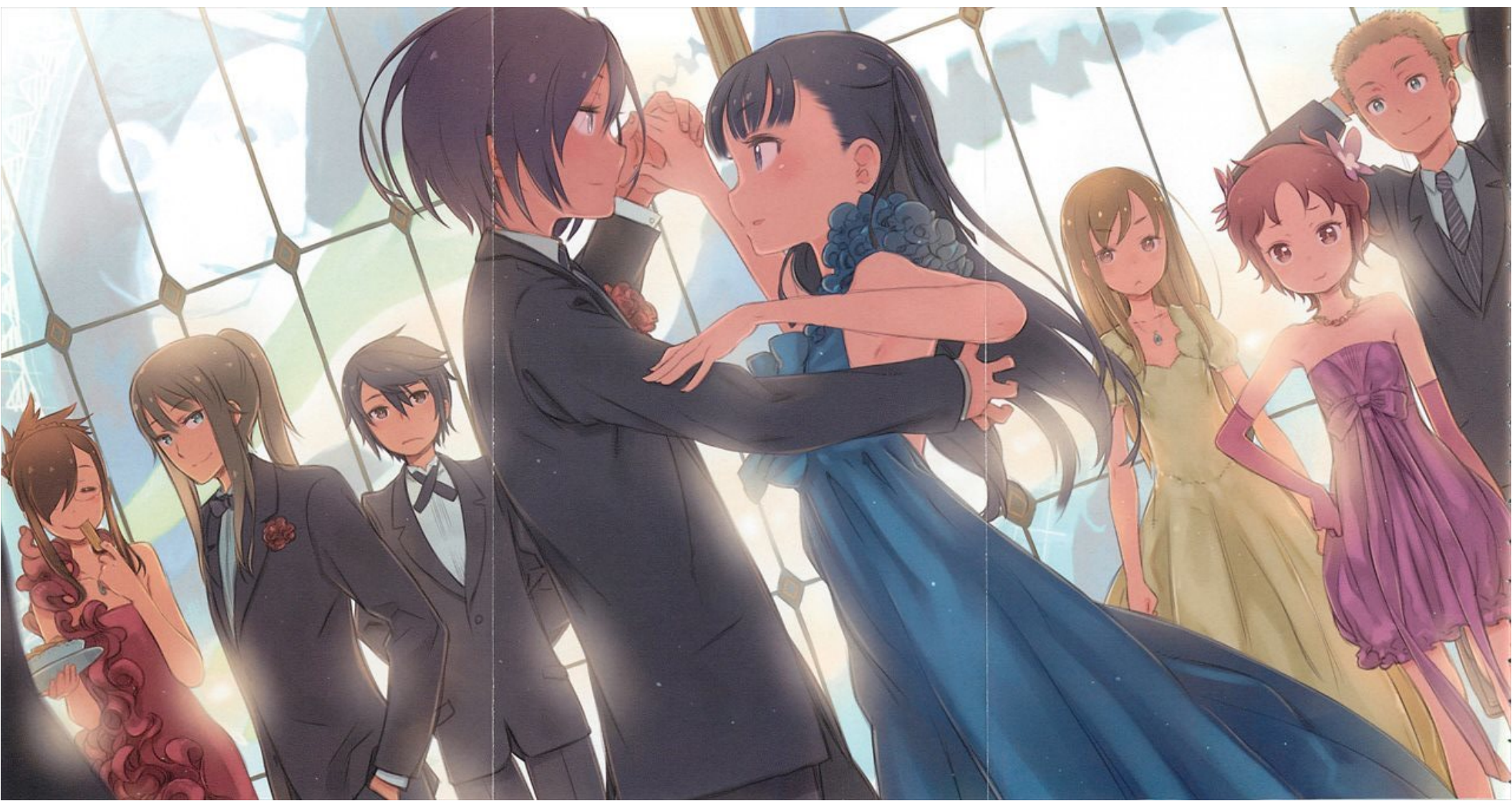
“Atta boy, Seron...you’ve come so far...I’m so proud of you!”

“You’re sounding like a regular mother figure. If memory serves, weren’t you s’pposed to be a guy?”

“More importantly, are you two simply going to watch from the sidelines? We should enjoy the evening as well.”

“You’ve got that right. It’s no fun just watching—I’m going to show off my moves.”

And life would go on—





ご愛読

ありがとうございました!!

黒屋紅白